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As a theory and political movement of the late 20th century, multiculturalism has emphasized recognition, tolerance, and the peaceful coexistence of cultures, while providing the groundwork for social justice and the expansion of the American literary canon. However, its sometimes uncomplicated celebrations of diversity and its focus on static, discrete ethnic identities have been seen by many as restrictive. As my project argues, contemporary ethnic American novelists are pushing against these restrictions by promoting what I call transethnicity, the process by which one formulates a dynamic conception of ethnicity that cuts across different categories of identity. Through the use of self-conscious or metafictional narratives, authors such as Louise Erdrich, Junot Díaz, and Percival Everett mobilize metafiction to expand definitions of ethnicity and to acknowledge those who have been left out of the multicultural picture. I further argue that, while metafiction is often considered the realm of white male novelists, ethnic American authors have galvanized self-conscious fiction—particularly stories depicting characters in the act of writing—to defy multiculturalism's embrace of coherent, reducible ethnic groups who are best represented by their most exceptional members and by writing that is itself correct and "authentic." Instead, under the transethnic model, ethnicity is self-conflicted, forged through ongoing revision and contestation and in ever-fluid responses to political, economic, and social changes.

“NECESSARY FICTIONS”: AUTHORSHIP AND TRANSETHNIC IDENTITY
IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN NARRATIVES

by

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To my parents and to Marc, with all of my love

APPROVAL PAGE

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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION: MULTICULTURALISM AND POST-1989
TRANSETHNIC METAFICTION

It is a waste of time hating a mirror / or its reflection / instead of stopping the hand / that makes glass with distortions.
--Audre Lorde, "Good Mirrors Are Not Cheap"

The pages are still blank, but there is a miraculous feeling of the words being there, written in invisible ink and clamoring to become visible.
--Vladimir Nabokov, "The Art of Literature and Commonsense"

In an interview with Harold Isaacs, Ralph Ellison compared himself to Richard Wright, Henry James, Ernest Hemingway, and other writers who had chosen exile from the United States in order to write. In contrast to those writers, Ellison remarked, "Personally, I am too vindictively American, too full of hate for the hateful aspects of this country, and too possessed by the things I love here to be too long away" (65). Isaacs was hoping to determine African American writers' connection to the continent of Africa, which some during the Harlem Renaissance thought of as their literary—if not also ancestral—homeland. Ellison's response confounded the anticipated connection. "I did not—and I do not—feel a lack in my cultural heritage as an American Negro. I think a lot of time is wasted trying to find a substitute in Africa," he told Isaacs. "The thing to do," he adds, "is to exploit the meaning of the life you have" (320). Here Ellison was not claiming satisfaction with the definition of African Americanness as it currently stood.

Instead, he was alluding to an ability to define his cultural heritage through his writing and his life, regardless of others' expectations.

While Ellison might have based his identity in one country (or continent) over another in order to defy expectations and discover a different meaning to his life, ethnic American writers today, I contend, seek to expand the borders of their literary homelands and, specifically, of ethnicity to encompass a multitude of histories and cultures. Echoing a character in Miguel Syjuco's *Ilustrado* (discussed in the penultimate chapter) who surmises that one's "real home country will be that common ground your work plows between you and your reader" (208), the authors—and the author-protagonists they portray in the works discussed in this dissertation—use their texts to forge unique collaborative junctures. Together, they directly confront and complicate the presumed distinctions between writer and audience in self-conscious or metafictional works of ethnic American fiction that capture the spirit of Ellison's critical yet capacious Americanness. Actually, the need for more malleable ways of defining ethnicity is as urgent now as it was in Ellison's era. Terrorist acts in New York and Boston, protests of police brutality and racial oppression in Ferguson and other parts of the country, and attempts to quell immigrant freedoms particularly in relation to the Mexican, South American, and Asian immigrant parents of children known as the DREAMers, have made Americanness and authenticity prominent themes of the current milieu. These and other recent momentous events are crystallizing the vital necessity for adaptable and comprehensive perspectives on identity, as well as personal interactions that destabilize hardened beliefs of whose lives and what definitions thereof truly matter in this country.

Representing these necessary points of connection as conversation and contestation—especially with those who have been left out of the multicultural picture, I argue that the authors in this project thus pursue articulations of American ethnicity that capture the fluidities of selfhood in numerous forms and intersections.

Countering Multiculturalism

One major difference between Ellison and the writers I focus on in this project is a matter of history—specifically of the events that transpired in the United States between Ellison’s obdurate claim of Americanness and the emergence of today’s writers of the past two decades. One of the most prominent consequences of the 1950s and 1960s push for civil rights in the United States is multiculturalism, which I use in this dissertation not as a *descriptive* term to denote the varied multiplicity of the United States population, but as an expressly *prescriptive* concept designating the social, political, educational, and commercial approaches meant to positively account for cultural diversity—that is, the distinct traditions, narratives, artifacts, values, and ways of life of U.S. cultural groups constituting what C.W. Watson calls a “common citizenship” (3). Resisting and often combating the unequal distribution of power and liberty in American society, the prescriptive version of multiculturalism takes on numerous nuances, emphases, and modifiers depending on who is using the notion: For example, many theorists identify it as “critical” or “managed multiculturalism” (Goldberg 26, 30). Meanwhile, Duncan Ivison describes “liberal multiculturalism” as taking on differing methods of championing equality but ultimately involving a “*transforming* [of] current

social and political arrangements, especially the cultural dimensions of these arrangements” (3). Finally, in calling it “multiculturalism proper” (8), George Crowder notes that the degree to which multiculturalism manifests itself in any nation “depends on how far the society, especially through its political norms and institutions, responds positively to the fact of diversity” (11). Like Anne Phillips, Tariq Madood, and others, Crowder feels that multiculturalism proper should, by definition, have certain moral, social, and political bases in anti-racist and anti-sexist values, as well as equality of inclusion.

To these scholars, the model of “tolerance” is therefore problematic on varying levels.¹ On the one hand, the above theorists distinguish multiculturalism from cultural relativism, a pluralistic philosophy that uniformly tolerates every culture’s rights to define morality and treatment of others in its own way. By treating all aspects of all cultures equally regardless of the relative presence or absence of social justice behind such shared values and traditions, cultural relativism thus potentially leads to the very racist, sexist, classist, and other intolerant perspectives that these critics generally feel are antithetical to multiculturalism in the first place.² Crowder notes that none of the major

¹ Many theorists discuss the rhetoric of tolerance as it relates to multiculturalism. Stanley Fish, for instance, differentiates between “weak” or what he calls “boutique” multiculturalism and “strong” multiculturalism. He diverges from what some describe as critical multiculturalism in his stance that, “For the strong multiculturalist the first principle is not rationality or some other supracultural universal, but tolerance” (383). Fish goes on to critique the conflicts inherent in this idea of tolerance to hint that both types are ultimately just forms of monoculturalism. Wendy Brown provides a nuanced critique of tolerance, identifying the mid-1980s as the start of “something of a global renaissance in tolerance talk” (2). She goes on to state that the United States has portrayed tolerance discourse as “both a universal value and an impartial practice. . . [that] regulates the presence of the Other both inside and outside the liberal democratic nation-state” (7, 8). For more on the intersections between toleration and multiculturalism, see Bartolomé, Crowder, Dhamoon, and Macedo.

² Representative of a divergence from this trend is Paul Scheffer, who writes, “Multicultural thinking in many respects represents a continuation of cultural relativism by other means” (197). Crowder counters that

multiculturalists—which include Canadian philosophers Will Kymlicka and Charles Taylor—are cultural relativists in this sense, but that some will occasionally “flirt” with the viewpoint in their theories (17). On the other hand, the idea of tolerance also evokes a passive acceptance that borders on distaste and condescension, as if we should simply put up with or begrudgingly accept other cultures, rather than actively cherish and support them. In opposition to tolerance advocates as well as pro-assimilation theorists who aim to erase minor cultures and absorb their behaviors and beliefs into that of the dominant group,³ the multiculturalists mentioned above for the most part would reason that the descriptive quality of multiculturalism—that is, the sense that societies are made up of numerous, diverse cultures—warrants respect, approval, and even direct encouragement. This is where the theorists part ways with their conservative counterparts, many of whom would claim that pro-diversity and anti-assimilation policies have weakened nations and their standing in the world.

Given that the authors in this project would hardly seem opposed to certain pro-diversity or anti-racist and anti-sexist measures, it is important to note that while I argue that the writers seek to expose the damaging limitations of multiculturalism, they also recognize that multiculturalism was at least partly beneficial to the United States and

Scheffer and others’ conflation of multiculturalism and cultural relativism is “seriously misleading” (17). A couple of famous examples come from Susan Moller Okin and Stanley Fish. Okin, in setting feminism in opposition to multiculturalism, also conflates certain aspects of cultural relativism, liberalism, and multiculturalism (especially as defined by Kymlicka). Fish’s “strong” multiculturalism has a “*deep* respect to all cultures at their core, for [the strong multiculturalist] believes that each has the right to form its own identity and nourish its own sense of what is rational and humane” (382). In the early stages of multicultural theory, many theorists like Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Werner Sollers occasionally interchanged the two terms, but more recently, the distinction upholds cultural relativism as the term that denotes a specific equality of authority for cultures of contradicting beliefs and moral standards.

³ The metaphor commonly associated with assimilation is the image of a melting pot, originating in a 1908 play by Israel Zangwill. For more on the concept, see Priscilla Wald and Patricia Chu.

often very useful and productive when it first emerged. At a recent speaking event at Butler University, I asked Jamaican-English author Zadie Smith how she felt about the word “multicultural,” a descriptor that critics often apply to her work. She mused at first about how odd it was that multiculturalism was seen in some countries as a matter of policy. One significant difference between multiculturalism in the United States versus the United Kingdom is that the former does not have any formal multicultural governmental practices in place.⁴ In the U.K., however, Smith became a direct beneficiary of local government efforts to foster multicultural communities. She emphasizes that she truly prospered from being able to check out books by non-white authors at the local library and, recalling her first novel, *White Teeth*, adds, “I wasn’t exaggerating when I wrote that I went to a school that spoke a hundred languages.” In fact, she grew up believing that all communities were multicultural, and was actually “shocked to find all-white communities in England. Things which were considered policies,” she concludes, “were truly life-savers to me.” Similarly, in the United States, multiculturalism has led to movements to advance equality, representation, recognition, and justice along ethnic, gender, and class lines in schools, businesses, and politics, leading to more diverse student bodies and curricula, as well as wider representation in workplaces and government policies.

Despite these successes, I argue that the contemporary, self-referential texts in this dissertation draw attention to how multiculturalism has outgrown its usefulness and has not gone far enough in addressing the inequalities experienced by certain

⁴ Other countries like Australia and Canada have more formal multicultural policies and official principles in place than that of the U.K. For more on Canada, see Gunew and Fleras.

intersectional groups. Significantly, the philosophy and practice has led to the demarcation of ethnic groups based on skin color, social behaviors, class, traditions, and—as is often the case with immigrant Americans and their offspring—national and/or continental associations that may or may not have actual relevance to the group members’ lived experiences and histories. The boundaries of “authentic” and “inauthentic” cultural expression are both externally imposed by those who seek to establish manageable categories of difference as well as, I maintain, internally imposed by ethnic groups who delimit affiliations by outlining what is or is not required for membership. In fact, some of the inherent complications with multiculturalism begin with its impositions on what counts as a legitimate group and which social, political, and economic rights can or should be awarded to these groups, often at the expense of individual and/or alternative experiences and distinctions. While K. Anthony Appiah agrees with Taylor, for instance, that certain “legitimate collective goals” of “large collective identities” (specifically that of French Canadians, with whom Appiah and Taylor are both concerned) can supersede individual autonomy (Appiah 157, 159), they diverge on the ideal methods and conditions under which such a balancing act can take place. Meanwhile, Kymlicka demands distinct political rights for particular groups such as First Nations groups and the Québécois nation based on privileging “a common language and social institutions, rather than common religious beliefs, family customs, or personal lifestyles” (346). While group distinctions are often helpful in addressing issues of inequality on the political level, the actual practices established to address such oppression have not been wholly effective in protecting the rights and interests

particularly of its most alienated and demoralized group members, nor has the philosophical mindset of multiculturalism led to wholesale improvements in the way we address the dynamic social, historical, and economic factors that continue to influence how we see and define ourselves.

Regardless of the nature of the collectivity and despite efforts to create perforated borders between and within these groups, U.S. multicultural institutions persist in blindly protecting and/or superficially celebrating distinct cultural groups. They police the makeup of these groups and sanitize and commodify difference while at the same time supporting only certain state-approved versions of history and culture, of storytelling and stories, and ultimately of ethnic identity in general. We can see this in the treatment of underprivileged African Americans, particularly in school systems and regulatory institutions like the prison system. Actually, the very nature of the term “African American”⁵ conflates diverse individuals from varied backgrounds and affiliations, purporting that a middle-class third-generation Haitian American citizen, for instance, shares the same values, experiences, and mindset as an upper-class Nigerian immigrant,

⁵ Unless deliberately hyphenated by the author or institution (for example, “Indo-American Heritage Museum”), I hyphenate neither the noun nor the compound adjective form of terms like “African American” or “Dominican American” in this dissertation. As Percival Everett says in an interview with Anthony Stewart, “the hyphen between ‘African’ and ‘American’ can be seen as a hyphen or as a minus sign” (296). Everett thus posits that hyphenating ethnic American qualifiers may further mark the subject as non-American. Other U.S. scholars make an argument similar to that voiced by Canadian critics Augie Fleurbaey and Jean Leonard Elliott, who state that “hyphenated labels and a view of minorities in terms of racial or ethnic background rather than as full-fledged Canadians can be a subtle form of racism and a constant reminder that people are not yet considered Canadian” (xiii). Because I wish to honor multiple backgrounds in my terminology, I thus avoid the hyphen as a way to speak to Fleurbaey and Elliott’s concerns. In fact, Oscar Campomanes takes their argument one step further, insinuating that hyphenating the term “Filipino American” privileges the second part of the phrase and limits the Filipino American connection to historical moments of immigration and nationality, obscuring what he refers to as “U.S. colonialism and its aftermath in the Philippines” (147). In this way, hyphenation may serve to uphold national and “American” understandings of identity, exclusive of other cultural and national associations. For similar reasons, I also avoid italicizing words that appear in languages other than English.

and should thus be educated and represented in the same way. While umbrella terms like “African American” can certainly be strategically useful, multiculturalism as it currently stands bases its very philosophy and politics on groups being reducible to essentialized races, ethnicities, classes, gender, nationalities, and levels of privilege.⁶ Any individual who does not fit the criteria, I contend, is politically, socially, and culturally disenfranchised. In fact, describing practices in the U.S. and Canada, Sneja Gunew observes that multiculturalism is “seen as a covert form of assimilationism and even of white supremacy” (*Haunted* 6). While celebrations of cultural difference are not inherently corrupt, then, we should oppose the way that multiculturalism has whitewashed and supplanted attempts to resist oppression based on factors such as ethnicity, religion, gender, class, or way of life, as well as the way that it has erased the lives and experiences of those who do not conform to its principles. As Rey Chow proclaims, “it is precisely at the time of multiculturalism, when ‘culture’ seems to be liberalized in the absence of metanarratives [and] to have become a matter of

⁶ Unless discussing issues related to racism, I largely attempt to avoid the term “race” as it often leads to a conflation of nonexistent biological presumptions of essentialism with race as a social construction. Instead, at the risk of repetitiveness, I prefer to use “ethnicity” to highlight the possibilities for agency inherent in the construction of the term, a concept that works well with my discussion of transethnicity. Ethnicity also allows for scalar variety (a concept I expound upon in the chapter analyzing Percival Everett and Miguel Syjuco’s responses to literary critics), whereas race closes off the possibilities of differing national affiliations (like “Cuban American”) and panethnic formations (like “Latino American”). While I recognize that everyone has the ability to claim an ethnicity(ies), for this project I define “ethnic American literature” in a way similar to that of The Society for the Study of the Multi-ethnic Literature of the United States which, on its website, designates its focus as “Latino, Native American, African American, Asian and Pacific American, and ethnically specific Euro-American literary works, their authors, and their cultural contexts.” More colloquially, I identify ethnic American literature as that which inexplicably comes after the broader rubric of “American literature” in major publishing catalogs, with the understanding (and even the hope) that this standard will change. An example of this is the hard copy Penguin literature catalog, which starts by listing “American literature,” followed immediately by “African American literature,” “Asian American literature,” and so on. The implication is that “pure” and unmarked Americanness is not a given construct in these latter instances, and has to be proven or otherwise differentiated.

‘entitlement’ rather than struggle, that we need to reemphasize the questions of power and underscore at every point the institutional forces that account for the continual hierarchization of cultures” (12).

Along these lines, in exploring contemporary works by authors such as Junot Díaz, Louise Erdrich, and Jonathan Safran Foer, I illustrate how literature is moving the multicultural conversation forward by portraying what I call transethnicity, a process of self-expression and self-fashioning that accounts for the fluidity and dynamic nature of the self as well as the cultural and material realities of particular ethnic identities. More to the point, I contend that transethnicity shifts the focus away from monolithic, ossified, and ahistorical comprehensions of belonging and responsibility and moves toward ongoing processes of contestation and personal interaction between and across individual group members in the form of writing, storytelling, and—most significantly—a constant rewriting to adapt to changing conditions and experiences. The texts discussed here thus challenge the idea of certain modes and ways of thinking and writing as more “authentic” or worthy of respect and responsiveness than others, instead highlighting ethnicity itself as a space of unremitting construction and negotiation of identity inside as well as across ethnic communities. The “trans” in my pivotal concept hints, in other words, at the cross-pollinations dynamically evolving both within and between recognized ethnicities. There exists, these texts assert, neither an a priori nor a self-contained version of blackness, Asian Americanness, or other ethnic American ways of being that we can retrieve or name as definitive sources or parameters for group identification or for defining an individual in that group. At the same time, however, transethnicity is not a form of

cultural relativism, nor does it attempt to equate one culture with another; instead, it seeks and highlights forms of subjectivity that have been pushed out or simply misjudged by seemingly inclusive models of multiculturalism and multiculturalist analysis. Thus, it replaces the latter with a critical method likely to retrace the actual processes by which ethnicity is constructed.

In the works analyzed here, the authors' goal is to *expand* what counts as legitimate self-expression, an objective often overlooked by critics focused on external prescriptions for change. Because the transethnic process consequently embraces "unacceptable" modes of storytelling as well as the "inauthentic" and ignored subject, it straddles the demarcating lines between ethnicities as well as other inflections of identity like gender, class, race, and level of privilege. I point to differing levels of privilege to propose that, while transethnicity is often a bottom-up practice beginning with oppressed individuals, privilege itself is not monolithic. Being able to write and to have those writings read is a form of privilege not universally afforded—a point I return to in my conclusion. Thus, while many of the fictional author-protagonists in this study are endowed with the luxury of writing and the educational and socioeconomic privileges that may or may not come with this skill, I am most concerned with their highlighting of aspects of their identity that nonetheless "disqualify" them from multicultural considerations or prevent them from freely accessing alternative, often unapproved modes of self-expression. Unlike theories that seek to place categories of identity into discrete and organized boxes, identity under the transethnic rubric is deliberately unfixed

and self-conflicted, presenting subjectivity as constantly in transit and receptive to social and material shifts.

An Ear for the Stories: Reading beyond the Multicultural

Leslie Marmon Silko's novel, *Ceremony*, provides a good example of how multicultural standards inhibit the transethnic process of fluid and inconstant self-fashioning. Published in 1977, Silko's story about a half-white, half-Laguna veteran named Tayo has since become part of the multiethnic American literary canon, with mainstream scholarship on the novel flourishing after 1989.⁷ Suffering from posttraumatic stress disorder as a result of his experiences in World War II, the loss of his cousin Rocky in the Bataan Death March, and the death—while he was away—of his surrogate father Uncle Josiah,⁸ Tayo returns home in the hopes of healing by reconnecting with his ethnic heritage and partaking in traditional Pueblo ceremony. While the elder medicine man Ku'oosh's ceremony is initially ineffective, Tayo eventually finds renewal through another medicine man, Betonie, who has transethnically altered his ceremony by adapting to changing external elements. Eventually, by abandoning the stories of fellow veterans and by distancing himself from the overly masculine, violent, and destructive peers who Kate Cummings describes as “parodies of

⁷ Prior to 1989, scholarship on *Ceremony* was limited to book reviews and mentions in some scholarly journals including *MELUS*, which begins to cover the novel in the 1980s. The *American Indian Quarterly* published a series of articles about Silko's novel in its February 1979 issue, but such attention was largely the exception until Paula Gunn Allen published *The Sacred Hoop* in 1986, and until the novel's subsequent prominence in relation to the culture wars and the literary canon.

⁸ The term posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) would not gain wide usage until it appeared in 1980. The term psychological term that would most likely have been used to describe Tayo's conditions at the time would have been “battle fatigue,” “combat exhaustion,” or the earlier term of “shell shock.” For more on the history of war-related trauma, see Crocq.

Western white men” (555), Tayo is able to return to the “pure” traditions of Ku’oosh and his grandmother to achieve completeness. In the light of multiculturalism, the road that Tayo takes to realize personal harmony is largely viewed as a success. He attains, by the novel’s conclusion, what many reviewers such as Elaine Jahner describe as “personal wholeness” (415).

To give a sense of what transethnicity adds to multiculturalism, I will briefly explore Silko’s novel as well as contemporaneous multicultural criticisms to the novel. First, the multicultural interpretations emphasize Tayo’s return to “authentic” Laguna life as the method by which he achieves wholeness and integrity. As described by the elders, including his grandmother, Tayo’s return must be precisely executed through a series of specific rituals that fill the meaninglessness that apparently overtakes him at the novel’s opening. Describing Tayo’s supposed emptiness in her influential 1986 analysis on *Ceremony* entitled *The Sacred Hoop: Recovering the Feminine in American Indian Traditions*, Paula Gunn Allen characterizes Tayo’s self in the first chapter as “yet unshaped, undistinguished from the mass it sprang from” (124), “an empty space. . . a vapor, an outline. He has no voice” (120). Tayo is suffering, Allen admits, but not from having gone through the events of war or other off-reservation events which she sees as having a negligible role in shaping his being. Instead his infirmity is “a result of separation from the ancient unity of person, ceremony, and land, and his healing is a result of his recognition of this unity” (Allen 119). Like Jahner, Karen Beardslee, and others, Allen describes Tayo as attaining a state of wholeness garnered through a proper adherence to Pueblo ritual (Allen 125). In fact, Tayo’s intermediary work with Betonie

on the land where, as Lorelei Cederstrom observes in 1982, “*true* ceremonies are preserved” (295) allows his return to the “pure” tradition that old Grandma and Ku’oosh represent, and leads to the unity Allen describes. As I argue in the upcoming chapters, transethnicity reveals the concepts of wholeness, accord, and authenticity—whether designated by outside forces or, as seen in *Ceremony*, internally imposed by dominant group members—to be elusive goals whose unfeasibility sets those like Tayo at a disadvantage.

The other relevant aspect about Tayo’s path emphasized by Allen and Cederstrom’s readings is the ceremony itself and its relation to language and the storytelling tradition. In fact, while not explicitly representing authorship as do the more recent novels discussed in this dissertation, *Ceremony* nonetheless exhibits characteristics of metafiction, including an intertextual blending of Tayo’s experiences with stories like the opening myth of the Thought-Woman, whose description doubles as a self-referential nod to Silko herself (Clayton 90-92, Silko 1-2). Akin to multiculturalism’s enforcement of regimented cultures, Allen, Cederstrom, and Cummings read Silko’s novel as negatively contrasting the Laguna ceremonies and mythologies to the events and storytelling of the “outside” world which have already infiltrated both the land and its people at the novel’s opening. Cummings, for example, summarizes Tayo’s ceremony as an “unlearn[ing] of the dominant culture” and a reacquisition of unadulterated Pueblo culture (568). Meanwhile, Cederstrom points to Tayo’s need to overcome illegitimate uses of language and story that have filtered in from the outside world. She describes the storytelling of Tayo’s fellow veterans as “profane” and merely “a temporary respite,”

and further points out that Tayo's "misuse of words"—that is, his curse against the rain while he was on the battlefield in Bataan—damages both his health and the livelihood of the Laguna people (294-5). What is vital to Tayo's therapy, she posits, is "the restoration of a proper relationship to the stories" (294). Cederstrom's phraseology—that of *restoration* through a *proper* reverence for language—exposes where multiculturalism eventually went wrong: in its indication that there is (in this case) an a priori version of Laguna identity that he can access, specifically by keeping to a set of "correct" approaches. While Allen characterizes Tayo's reinstatement as an affirmation of much older origins when all living creatures were one and where such distinctions as ethnicity and nationality would have been inconsequential, she too succumbs to the implication that Tayo has a proper and "normal place" in Laguna life to which he can return (125). Ultimately, Allen, Cederstrom, and Cummings read peace and wholeness into Tayo's return to his homeland and to his voice by contrasting this with Silko's negative portrayal of influences beyond the limits of Laguna land.

The multicultural impulse to isolate and protect Laguna cultural and geographical elements from the outside world is certainly reasonable; Tayo is not the only veteran to return home feeling emotionally and physically displaced, and other outside events, like the runoff from a nearby uranium mine, threaten the land and even the people who do not leave the reservation. Moreover, while the three critics do not mention this explicitly, Silko's stratification of life on and off the reservation is also a deeply personal attempt to recreate a place for which she had a great deal of nostalgia. In a letter to poet James Wright, she writes, "You pointed out a very important dimension. . . when you said it was

as if the land was telling the stories in the novel. . . . When I was writing *Ceremony* I was so terribly devastated by being away from the Laguna country that the writing was my way of re-making that place, the Laguna country, for myself” (27-28). Silko, then, sought a very deliberate and focused representation of Laguna life in opposition to the “outside” world that, at the time of her writing, provided little to no relative comfort. Furthermore, particularly in the case of Native American and First Nations tribes, membership along bloodlines and familial lineages has stark physical and material consequences related to property, access to healthcare, and other concerns. Nonetheless, as it relates to Tayo’s self-construal, the loss of his cousin and other formative experiences in the world beyond the reservation cannot be denied or ignored, regardless of Tayo’s attempts to do so.

Switching to a transethnic reading, then, there is a sense in which the voice recovered at the novel’s conclusion is not Tayo’s, or at least not a voice he crafted of his own accord. Nor is an absolute feeling of peace and remove from the outside world completely sustainable for him: After all, the drought continues. And, as Tayo’s lover Ts’eh points out, the tribe’s sacred elk petroglyph has not been maintained “since the war” (Silko 231). Finally, his cousin Rocky, as well as countless other soldiers, would never return to the reservation, and the chances that Tayo could eternally avoid the other surviving veterans or completely dissolve his traumatic memories of fighting overseas are slim. Thus, to aver as Allen does that Tayo is a mere vapor at the start of the novel is to deny any role his other experiences may have had in shaping his voice and his self-fashioning. While Tayo could have contributed to the process of his own healing—that is, transethnically authorized a sense of his self in a way that denies neither his Laguna

traditions nor his most recent experiences of war and the “outside” world, the internal inhibitions placed on him in the reservation forbid him to consider the “profane” stories of his fellow Laguna veterans, or even stories he keeps held within his private self.

The transethnic process by which Tayo may forge a more faithful sense of self involves a reclaiming of his voice and all of his experiences. In *Ceremony*’s final pages, Tayo says his final goodbyes to Rocky and his Uncle Josiah. The narration distances itself from Tayo at this moment to describe the landscape before stating, “The ear for the story and the eye for the pattern were theirs; the feeling was theirs: we came out of this land and we are hers” (Silko 236). Critics designate this proclamation as a sign of Tayo’s wholeness and harmony with the land and its people, but it may conversely point to his acquiescence to others’ stories in place of his own. In a sense, *Ceremony* is about whose stories dominate and whose words are proper and acceptable. In a moment that speaks as much to generational difference as it does to cultural difference, old Grandma claims her gossip to be superior to others’. The narrator relates that, to old Grandma, “The story was all that counted. If she had a better one about them, then it didn’t matter what they said” (82). Though the incident is amusing, it also illustrates that stories and storytelling have a set hierarchy, and that Tayo’s stories and forms of authorship matter only to the extent that they fit the criteria set by Ku’oosh, his grandmother, and others. The assimilation which Tayo’s people resist is one of the Laguna against the outside world, a kind of isolation that I argue cannot fully account for Tayo’s thoughts and experiences. In fact, he himself leaves his previous knowledge behind to become assimilated instead into what is supposed to be “authentic” Laguna culture. Cederstrom confirms this when she observes

that Tayo becomes “absorbed by [the Laguna people], he thinks with their words, and see with their eyes” (296). While not discounting the interpretations that Allen and others make about the Laguna influences that mold Tayo’s identity, transethnicity would allow Tayo to shape his ethnicity based too on the stories he and his fellow veterans share and the other experiences that influence his life. In fact, the cross-cultural nature of transethnicity is not unlike the “cross-textual” or intertextual incorporation of a variety of stories into a single text. Moreover, a critical approach to ethnic authenticity would convert what Allen calls Tayo’s “empty space” or existence into what several of the authors in the project refer to as the “blank page”—that is, productive moments of possibility fueled by the promise of self-authorship and the chance to construct ethnicity through their own chosen paradigms.

A recent text that more explicitly encourages transethnic interpretation is Toni Morrison’s *Home*. While there are significant differences in the narratives and the two cultures they portray, Morrison’s 2012 novel, like *Ceremony*, also tells the story of a traumatized veteran who returns home in the mid-20th century, this time to a segregated African American town of Lotus, Georgia, after having lost both of his best friends in the Korean War. While the lotus blossom symbolizes purity and rebirth, for the protagonist Frank Money, the town of Lotus is “the worst place in the world, worse than any battlefield. . . there was no future, just long stretches of killing time” (Morrison 83). The thought of returning home horrifies him. Frank is further haunted by his experiences in the war and by an incident in Lotus that opens the novel, where a younger Frank and his little sister Cee witness a black man in a zoot suit clandestinely buried, possibly while

still alive. In an interview with Christopher Bollen, Morrison explains, “the zoot-suit guys, postwar, in the late ‘40s, early ‘50s, they were outrageous—they were asserting a kind of maleness, and it agitated people. The police used to shoot them.” Likening the event to more recent incidents of black males such as Trayvon Martin being killed for wearing hoodies, Morrison, like Silko, points to the dangers of blatant expressions of masculinity as a person of color, and further portrays how U.S. mistreatment of its veterans compounds and complicates this distress. More overtly than Silko, however, Morrison also confronts the ethics of storytelling by alternating third-person accounts of Frank coming home to protect Cee, with first-person conversations where Frank directly interrogates the implied author.

Frank’s constant address, revision, and reproach of the omniscient narrator’s words—moments of unrelenting call-and-response—embody Frank’s transethnic endeavor to author himself: to set the terms by which he can construct his identity, even as he himself hesitates to face the events that have shaped his life. Winking at the multicultural impulse that he believes makes the narrator “set on telling [his] story” (5), he goes on to dare and cajole the writer to unearth some truth and authenticity from his experiences, even as he himself knows the futility of the enterprise. Recalling the dreadfulness of poverty and the food pantry, for instance, he challenges, “Write about that, why don’t you?” (40). He disputes the writer’s presumption about his relationships with women, stating, “I think you don’t know much about love. . . . Or me” (69). Finally, recounting his feelings about returning to Lotus on his way to retrieve his sister, he tells the narrator, “Don’t paint me as some enthusiastic hero. I had to go but I dreaded it” (84).

Frank's authorial adjustments confirm that he is not the traditional romantic hero, the prototypical veteran honored during military commemorations, or one of the exceptional African Americans highlighted during Black History Month. The exchanges between Frank and the implied author—who in this case also becomes a reader—signify the inherent unknowability of others, the impossibility of placing people in discrete boxes or categories. Even Morrison seems to agree with her character's implications; while she does not distance herself from Frank's story, her writing style in both the first- and third-person passages of *Home* is noticeably leaner and less elaborate than any of her previous works.

Morrison, similar to Silko, may be in danger of proffering a sense of impossible wholeness with Cee, who finds solace in the company of the Lotus women and who, at the novel's end, helps Frank give the zoot-suited man an honorable burial.⁹ However, the ending also leaves Frank and the implied narrator vacillating between considering Frank's makeshift grave marker—inscribed “Here Stands a Man”—as “wishful thinking” or as an affirmation backed by the tree upon which Frank nails the marker. In *Home*'s last first-person passage, Frank finally confronts his horrific actions during the war and permits the implied author to continue with the narrative (115). His permission, both subtle and tentative, acknowledges that he himself has taken ownership of his story. Frank and the narrator, through ongoing conversation, reach an uneasy agreement about how to portray his life. With transethnicity, uneasy agreements may actually be one of the

⁹ While, as aforementioned, Morrison takes pains to keep her prose for *Home* relatively sparse, the character Cee is painted with a far fainter brush than Frank, not surprising given that her original idea for a title, according to her interview with Bollen, had been *Frank Money*.

ultimate goals in reclaiming ethnicity away from multicultural limitations. This is not to say, however, that the transethnic impulse that dominates these writings is wholly pessimistic. In fact, seeing American ethnicity as an ongoing creative undertaking opens up the possibility of attaining increased social justice in a country that limits its true citizenship to only a select few. The blank page that symbolizes the authorial exchanges in these texts is one that promises hope as well as constant revision and progress.

Metafiction and Transethnicity

Transethnicity eschews superficial celebrations of cultural difference—what Tzvetan Todorov calls, in describing exoticism, “praise without knowledge” (265)—to instead focus on empathetic conversation and close affiliation as a way to advance ethnic self-expression. For instance, Kiese Laymon’s novel, *Long Division*, demonstrates the limitations of multiculturalism without personal connection, relating how his school principal tried to make a recent influx of Mexican students “feel accepted by having a taco/burrito lunch option three times a week and a Mexican Awareness Week twice each quarter. After the second quarter,” the protagonist City observes, “it made most of us respect their Mexican struggle but it didn’t do much for helping us really distinguish names from faces. We still call all five of the boys ‘Sergio’ at least twice a quarter” (3). While providing accessibility to diverse foods evokes the kind of “boutique multiculturalism” that Fish and others differentiate from more politically active forms of multiculturalism, City’s lack of genuine personal connection to his Mexican classmates exposes the foundational problems inherent in various levels of multicultural practice.

Like the other protagonists discussed in this project, City discovers in the ensuing narrative that forging more meaningful interactions with others through close and intimate relationships allows him to better access his own stumbling attempts to define himself.

City develops this transethnic approach to his identity through the assorted encounters he has with others in the text, but a specific one from Laymon's novel that stands out also details the nuances of language and uncovers City's growing awareness of the power of authorship. His friend MyMy, a white and impoverished little girl from his grandmother's neighborhood, meekly asks City for the meaning of the word "nigga," a slur applied to him by several racist locals. He pauses thoughtfully before explaining to her that the word

means below human to some folks and it means superhuman to some other folks. Do you even know what I'm saying? And sometimes it means both to the same person at different times. And, I don't know. I think 'nigga' can be like the word 'bad.' You know how bad mean a lot of things? And sometimes, 'bad' means 'super good.' Well, sometimes being called a 'nigga' by another person who gets treated like a 'nigga' is one of the top seven or eight feelings in the world. And other times, it's in the top two or three worst feelings. (Laymon 96-97)

Together, City and MyMy continue to muddle through the different ways that such slurs and categories can affect them based on their ethnic, class, and gender backgrounds.

MyMy's ultimate realization—one that City brushes off at this point in the novel but that will certainly return to him by the novel's end—is that the two of them can collectively agree that certain negative language and classifications need not apply to them (Laymon *Long* 97). City, by making the effort to cut across his and MyMy's various differences

through emotional exertion and fraught cross-cultural conversation, begins the journey towards the moment I explore in my concluding chapter, when City awakens to his own consciousness as an author.

Due to transethnicity's focus on ethnic identity as conversation and contestation, it only makes sense that the primary vehicle for working out this literary approach to self-expression is metafiction. Metafiction can be broadly defined as self-conscious literature—or, as Linda Hutcheon describes, “fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity” (1). This project focuses on a subgenre of metafiction that directly considers the reader-writer relationship, with literary works depicting protagonists and often numerous other fictional characters as authors and/or as readers who muse on the meaning of artistic creation as it relates to the self. In describing the impetus behind metafiction, Patricia Waugh notes that “[m]etafictional novels tend to be constructed on the principle of a fundamental and sustained opposition: the construction of a fictional illusion (as in traditional realism) and the laying bare of that illusion. In other words,” she continues, “the lowest common denominator of metafiction is simultaneously to create a fiction and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction” (6). Transethnic metafiction complements Waugh's description but also includes as part of its lowest common denominator proclamations about the construction of the self as depicted through author-characters. Through transethnic metafiction, I hope to move self-conscious fiction beyond its common domain of “Western aesthetics” (Mwangi ix; Jen 60) by underscoring the genre's ability to support a

space where writerly protagonists of all backgrounds can challenge and complicate ideas such as national belonging and ethnicity.

While few recent theorists focus specifically on metafiction, the subject of the author and who or what he or she represents continues to be a hotly contested topic in postmodern literary theory. Roland Barthes's 1967 proclamation of the death of the author has ignited a new wave of current scholarship by Seán Burke, Jane Gallop, Laura E. Savu, Eugen Simion, Benjamin Widiss, and others. Rather than concentrating on metafiction and the implications this form can have on our understanding of subjectivity, these scholars instead seek to analyze what Burke describes as the author's death and subsequent return, the latter of which he notes "takes place almost instantaneously with the declaration of authorial departure" (Burke 7). However, while absorbed with the (primarily "real" and historical) author's return, these critics surprisingly leave out any extensive discussion of ethnic identity or, for that matter, ethnic American authors—that is, authors of commonly hyphenated American ethnicities such as Asian Americans, Native Americans, African Americans, Latino Americans, Jewish Americans, and so on.¹⁰ The closest approximations, Madelyn Jablon's *Black Metafiction* (1997) and Patricia Chu's *Assimilating Asians* (2000), are certainly vital studies, but the former focuses largely on intertextuality, orality, and self-consciousness in African American texts written before 1995, while the latter text limits discussion primarily to Asian American experiences of immigration, discrimination, and marginalization, particularly

¹⁰ While I do discuss gender, religions, class, and other related aspects of identity since the lines between these ways of being are inevitably blurred, my project nonetheless focuses primarily on the overlap between culture and ethnic identity. For more on my definition of ethnic American literature, see footnote 6 above.

as described by empirical Asian American authors and/or in the pages of Asian American bildungsromane. The nature of the author—whom Brian McHale depicts as an “ontologically amphibious figure, alternately present and absent” (202)—demands further cross-cultural exploration into the question of subjectivity and the impulse of philosophies like multiculturalism to classify and compartmentalize.

The author’s ghostly, liminal presence in the texts exhibits a kind of transethnic fluidity motivated by numerous influences. Metafiction, Evan Maina Mwangi explains, is itself “a cross-culturally employed technique that varies in application from one text to another depending on the talents of the writer and the historical, political and social contingencies that the text seeks to signify” (25). As Silko’s admissions to homesickness while writing *Ceremony* prove, the author’s experiences and contexts, then, participate heavily into the narratives and arguments made in metafictional texts, and the creation of metafiction is subsequently not exclusive to one background over another. Authors, in fact, are inherently liminal figures. Along these lines, Alexander Nehamas comments that, “Unlike fictional characters, authors are not simply parts of texts” and, he adds, “unlike actual writers, they are not straightforwardly outside them” (100). In reality, the parallels between the author and a transethnic fluidity of identity are not unwarranted. In most literary texts, the author is both powerful and marginal, self-sustained and interdependent, and wielding partial and temporary control over his or her own words. Seizing on the contradictory nature of authorship, Andrew Bennett points out that “the author is both him- or herself, individual, unique, a one-off and at the same time, *as author*, more than this, a general or ‘universal figure, a figure that goes beyond its own

genesis, its own origins in and as a particular, unique individual” (126). In fact, self-referential authors, by deliberately drawing attention to this conflicted dynamic, come closest to mimicking the transethnic process: They defy categories of expectation and transgress supposedly established borders of literature and the real in such a way that the author’s “intrusion,” as Bakhtin writes, “destroys [the text’s] aesthetic stability” (191). In the narratives analyzed in this dissertation, the authors are in explicit conversation with their audiences, feeling out their roles in the narrative and the influences that they should have upon the text, its characters, and readers. Authorial interaction in transethnic metafiction, then, can be read as disrupting our notions of ethnicity both inside and outside of the text.

Critics of metafiction like John Aldridge dismiss contemporary self-referential fiction as narcissistic and as both a product of, and a reaction to, modern and postmodern malaise. Nevertheless, I maintain that the ethnic American authors analyzed in this project productively mobilize self-conscious forms and writerly tropes in order to theorize on the state of American literature as it stands today in relation to ethnic representation and cultural difference. I show how these texts rewrite authorship and metafiction itself as being not wholly negative, introspective, or solipsistic. Instead, such texts can venture outward into the world by presenting the possibilities that can emerge through self-authorship and the transethnic process. As opposed to concentrating exclusively on the real, lived experience of ethnic American authors or on a wide spectrum of metafictional aspects, this dissertation focuses on fictionalized depictions of authorship in contemporary ethnic American novels to pursue what I posit is a refined

literary reconstruction of the self attuned to the aftermath of 1960s and 1970s assimilationist pluralism, as well as to the subsequent institutionalization of 1980s multiculturalism and ethnic studies. To borrow a phrase from Everett's *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell* (which in turn appropriates Wallace Stevens), the texts analyzed in this project draw attention to the "necessary fictions" (79) of how we construct ourselves transethnically in connection with others. Acts of self-authoring, portrayed as events, conversations, and inconstant declarations, thus become discursive lenses through which fictional texts conceptualize and reinvent ethnic identity in the real world.

While treated here as a literary and theoretical concern, transethnicity also foregrounds the need to revisit the meaning, application, and execution of existing political practice. By highlighting the divide between multicultural philosophies of inclusiveness and their contradictory practices of stratification, transethnicity reads the language of such policies in order to determine how these disparities could be rectified. See, in this vein, Judith Butler's reactions during an interview with George Yancy to the recent protests around the tragic incidents involving Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, and Michael Brown—black unarmed males killed as a result of excessive police force. Contemplating the discrepancy between the protest slogans of "Black lives matter" versus "All lives matter," Butler notes that the latter statement, while correct, "misunderstand[s] the problem. . . . If we jump too quickly to the universal formulation, 'all lives matter,' then we miss the fact that black people have not yet been included in the idea of 'all lives.'" She continues that "to make that universal formulation concrete, to make that into a living formulation, one that truly extends to all people, we have to

foreground those lives that are not mattering now, to mark that exclusion, and militate against it.” Applying Butler’s formation to a transethnic interpretation of the law, then, would prove that aspects related to citizenship and human rights in the United States need to overcome similar disparities between the language represented in the law and the actual execution of that language in the real world.¹¹

Theorizing art’s engagement with the real, Nicolas Bourriaud refers to certain works of performance art from the 1990s and onward as exhibiting a relational aesthetics, “taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context” (14). While he glosses over specific aspects of human interactions that are overtly more antagonistic and political,¹² Bourriaud’s conception of art and human interaction is nonetheless applicable to transethnic metafiction, particularly since he characterizes the goal of relational art as “*learning to inhabit the world in a better way*, instead of trying to construct it based on a preconceived idea of historical evolution.” The responsibility of art, he asserts, is “to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real” (13). Transethnic metafiction, with its energetic presentation and direct audience interaction, functions in this way as a kind of relational performance art. The literary genre’s own relational nature encourages readers to consider the narrative and its implications on levels both within and beyond the text. Thus, rather than assuming that the “self” of “self-conscious fiction” refers only to the text, we must consider how the self factors into the author as subject. This writerly collectivity of authors as characters

¹¹ For more on the political applications of transethnicity and the concept of “Black Lives Matter,” see the concluding chapter.

¹² For more on this interpretation of *Relational Aesthetics*, see Claire Bishop.

and narrators allows, I submit, for a wide consideration of the ways that authorship relates to notions of agency, ethnicity, history, and—most vital to this project—self-construal, or how individuals understand themselves with respect to the world and people around them. Under transethnicity, ethnic identity becomes a continuously revised personal and artistic composition. Or, to paraphrase Roland Barthes' description of texts, ethnicity evolves into "a multidimensional space. . . a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centers of culture" (128) that have influenced its definers.¹³

Beyond the Death of the Author: A Transethnic Postmodernism?

Historically speaking, my dissertation addresses what Amy Hungerford identifies as the "reigning bifurcation of contemporary fiction into the 'postmodern' avant-garde and the writing of women and people of color that was so often dismissed, in the academy, as naively realist or concerned more with social issues than with the development of literary aesthetics" (411). I counter this restrictive separation between form and content by attending to novels that deliberately skirt both sides of the divide, in addition to reading novelists as theorists to reveal how they themselves speak back to multicultural literary criticism. I diverge from critics like Hungerford, however, in that I

¹³ While there are definite parallels in the way that texts, authorship, and ethnicity interact with the past and with other cultures, ethnicity differs from comprisals of Foucault, Barthes, and Eliot in what it includes. For instance, whereas Eliot wrote that "the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole literature of Europe from Homer, and within it the whole literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order" (1582), transethnicity accounts for the fact that some experiences are going to be more accessible and more influential than others. Speaking of writers like the Haitian American novelist Edwidge Danticat, Bharati Mukherjee underscores the creative limitations of Barthes and Eliot's formations of author and text, stating, "Danticat's generation of immigrant US authors appear to have no quarrel with Eliot's demand for a 'historical sense,' but for a significant number, the homeland histories are non-European, and the multiracial, multicultural US in which they compose literature has a plurality of narrative traditions" (Mukherjee 682).

find productive potential in the marker of the “contemporary” as it relates to the post-1989 era.

To illustrate, the period which George Lawson calls “the global 1989” is conterminous with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the eventual end of the Cold War, the Tiananmen Square massacre, and widespread geopolitical and/or economic upheavals that began in the 1960s and 1970s. Many scholars including Amir Eshel, Jodi Kim, Christian Moraru, and others go on link the aftermath of the Cold War to a change in American literatures. For instance, Kim focuses on how Asian American literature and film have been defined by, and in turn how they themselves have reacted in the period following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. She writes that the previous political and military tension between the world’s eastern and western powers “continues to enjoy a persisting recursiveness when seen as a structure of feeling, a knowledge project, and a hermeneutics for interpreting developments,” all of which she situates as being the “*protracted afterlife* of the Cold War” influencing how Americans justify earlier imperialist ventures in Asia as well as the more recent War on Terror (Kim 3, 4).

Changes in the United States particularly relating to an upheaval of the boundaries of American nationality, ethnicity, and sexuality are also causing domestic turmoil at this time. For example, marking this time period are the emergence of queer theory and the formation of LGBTIQ activist organizations in reaction to increasing homophobia in the wake of the U.S. AIDS epidemic of the 1980s. In the realm of ethnicity and nationality, Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s “open letter to the national arts community” begins by observing, “It’s 1989 in this troubled continent accidentally called America. A major

paradigm shift is taking place in front of our eyes. The East Coast/West Coast cultural axis is being replaced by a North/South one” (183). In other words, Gómez-Peña implies that immigration, specifically that concerning the Mexican-U.S. border, has come to significantly redefine American culture in this era. Mixed race and multiracial organizations such as the Association of MultiEthnic Americans (AMEA) and Project RACE also emerged, challenging perceptions of cultural purity and, on more practical and political levels, issues like anti-miscegenation laws, the census, and restrictive classifications in public schools. In his *Racial Asymmetries*, Stephen Sohn further sets this time period as the dividing line marking Asian American works in which the authors’ ethnicities primarily matched that of the characters, a trend that he observes branching off after 1989 due to the developing status of Asian Americans as model minorities and the commodification of Asian American literature as reflected by the popularity of novelist Amy Tan (5-6, 14). And finally, more broadly speaking, Neda Atanasoski connects the European to the American experience by arguing that the fragmentation of Eastern Europe motivated the United States as a whole to “shift from the rhetoric of civil rights that demanded institutional inclusion to the rhetoric of multiculturalism that subsumed ongoing material disparities through the compensatory language that celebrated ‘ethnic’ and ‘cultural’ diversity as a sign of national maturity” (215). In other words, the nationalistic upswing following the Cold War incited a positive emphasis on American diversity at the expense of addressing domestic social oppression.

Thus, most relevant to this project, the era leading up to the dividing marker of 1989 was a moment of multiculturally-inspired frenzy in the United States, especially in

relation to discourse of the literary canon. While many critics and historians would note that arguments for a new and more representative curriculum had been growing since the 1960s and 1970s, the debates did not gain national attention until the late 1980s with the culture wars—that is, clashes and debates over whether universities should have a canon and what its contents should comprise, as well as the establishment of ethnic studies, women and gender studies, and related curriculum in universities. The period also saw the rise of important collections that sought to widen the scope of American literature, including Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa’s *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings By Radical Women of Color* and *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women’s Studies*, edited by Gloria Hull, Patricia Scott, and Barbara Smith. The controversy over the canon and curriculum came to a head when Stanford University contemplated dropping several works—including Plato’s *Republic* and Dante’s *Inferno*—from its undergraduate core reading list at the end of the 1980s at the behest of non-white and female students who felt the required list was too Eurocentric. Herbert Lindenberger reported that the event sparked sensational and often melodramatic headlines like “Stanford Puts an End to Western Civilization” (Lindenberger 149).¹⁴

Of course, equating the diversification of the canon with a weakening of American or Western values insinuate that ethnic Americans are not part of American culture, and even presumes, as Sohn puts it, a false “unification among the author,

¹⁴ The Western Culture course at the center of this debate was replaced with Culture, Ideas and Values (CIV), and finally the Introduction to the Humanities (IHUM) in the late 1990s. According to Jenny Thai, as recently as 2012, renewed debate over the content of the required freshman core course has led to another change, this time to a more interdisciplinary and discretionary class entitled Thinking Matters.

narrative perspective, and narrative content” (5). An example of this is the assumption that Chicano culture, for instance, could be easily represented in the curriculum by a including in the reading list, say, Sandra Cisneros’s 1984 work, *The House on Mango Street*, a text that would presumably represent and embody “the” Chicano experience. Or that simply adding Zora Neale Hurston’s 1937 novel *Their Eyes were Watching God* to the syllabus would mean that all black people and literary forms are now represented by this addition, as if African American authenticity were an attainable and singular aspiration.¹⁵ In the midst of the culture wars, assumptions of fair inclusion and representation displaced the urgency to address political and social inequalities experienced by different cultural groups. As Jodi Melamed notes, “The canon wars made it easy to misrecognize literature as accomplished social and political transformation and used a preoccupation with literary culture to marginalize antiracist materialisms” (108).

In fact, the prominence of multiculturalism and the canon wars inspired Henry Louis Gates (borrowing from W.E.B. Du Bois) to declare that “the problem of the twenty-first century will be the problem of ethnic differences, as these conspire with complex differences in color, gender, and class” (xii). Actually, the debate over what constitutes correct responses to diversity in U.S. society continues today, even if the overly politically charged catchword of multiculturalism is no longer evoked. Gates’s prediction, then, continues to hold true, with the post-1989 contemporary period already occupying so complicated a place in the American cultural imaginary that the Asian

¹⁵ Discussing “burdens of [black] representation,” Gates actually contrasts Hurston’s famous novel to her later 1948 novel featuring poor white characters, noting, “The reason that nobody reads Zora Neale Hurston’s *Seraph on the Suwannee* isn’t unrelated to the reason that everybody reads *Their Eyes were Watching God*” (179).

American Writers Workshop hosted a five-part symposium in 2012 entitled “After 1989: Race after Multiculturalism” where, in part, they sought to address such sweeping questions as “What Do We Talk About When We Talk About Race?” Themes of agency, history, and identity remain highly contested in literary and cultural studies, a fact mirrored by the large amount of postmodern ethnic American fiction since 1989 that features writing as a profession, obsession, or central plot element. Such a long list could include recent novels by Sherman Alexie, Julia Alvarez, Alex Gilvarry, Jessica Hagedorn, Mat Johnson, Dany LaFerriere, Mark Leyner, Michael Thomas, and John Edgar Wideman, just to name a few. Some authors, like Percival Everett and Gina Apostol, have further made language, authors, and the act of authoring (and/or authorizing) texts persistent tropes in their oeuvres.

The literature emerging out of the multicultural era highlights issues of ethnicity and identity, leading to the self-conscious and self-conflicted literary prominence of transethnic metafiction, which itself marks a change in the fundamental problem of authorship in the postmodern era. Describing the more well-established view of contemporary authorship, McHale points out, “What is strange and disorientating about the postmodernist author is that even when s/he appears to know that s/he is only a function, s/he chooses to behave, if only sporadically, like a subject, a presence” (201). However, the postmodern obsession with whether writers are aware of and express their presence on the page is no longer in question in transethnic metafiction. Indicating a change in postmodernism’s preoccupation with the author’s death or return, the conversation has now shifted to the *nature* of that unquestioned presence and to the

interactive levels of reality and subjectivity that are exposed and complicated as a result of authors featuring other writers on the printed page. I propose transethnic metafiction as a direct response to this shift, one that makes explicit the hidden interactions that occur in all texts between reader, writer, and the realities that they both inhabit. Transethnic metafiction dramatizes such literary interactions as a fundamental part of the process of reimagining ethnicity.

Authorship and Necessary Fictions: Project Outline

An analysis of authorship as depicted by these texts opens up a way to examine aspects of self-expression unique to this period, to highlight ethnic identities in the act of becoming rather than being, with characters discovering new modes of self-expression at the crossroads of different backgrounds, cultures, and languages. The transethnic argument thus complicates David Hollinger's notion of postethnicity as favoring "voluntary over involuntary affiliations" (3) and Werner Sollors differentiation between descent and consent in the sense that I recognize the components characterizing certain ethnicities has become—for better or worse—somewhat involuntary and unavoidable; the pervasiveness of globalization in the contemporary age forefronts a version of ethnic identity that accounts for various voluntary and involuntary experiences of heritage, culture, and nationality. In contrast to the problematic assumptions of the "post-" in Hollinger's "postethnic," transethnicity underscores this dynamic development of the self within and across cultural experiences in this era. The intersectional process of such a self-made subjectivity underlines how, particularly in more recent times, the

consideration of ethnicity automatically activates a plurality of traditions, styles, and cultures across spatial, national, temporal, and textual borders. This set of transethnic narratives, while situated here as a contemporary ethnic American project, could be simply an American project, or, to take it further, perhaps even *the* American story of the current age.

What I am calling transethnicity is not an entirely new concept but is instead an increasingly prominent cultural dominant of the post-1989 era that finds some overlaps in earlier philosophies like pluralism and multiculturalism. As maintained in this chapter, transethnicity continues to be employed even more intensely in the contemporary era as sociocultural praxis, as a way to counter ahistorical and disjunctive perspectives of ethnic identity, but also as a critical method by which we can develop an interpretively more productive alternative to the restrictiveness of classical or liberal multiculturalism. An example of an earlier related parallel to transethnicity is Homi Bhabha's view of hybridity, which evokes new cultures emerging out of the colonial encounter and is, unlike transethnicity, tied almost exclusively to moments of imperialism and postcolonialism. Another related concept might be Gloria Anzaldúa's "new mestiza," in which she identifies as being "cultureless" due to her opposition to patriarchal belief systems, while also simultaneously "participating in the creation of yet another culture" (80-81) in order to skirt the extreme dualities that society often inflicts on Chicana women. Unlike these initiatives, by discussing the transethnic, I show how ethnic identity itself has been made over in these texts as an intersectional archaeology of identity, one that declares an individual's ethnic identity as indefinable unless considered through a

personal process of continuing interaction and opposition. Therefore, in place of Diane Ravitch's concept of particularism, which looks to single ethnicity studies as a way to uphold cultural heritage and history, I show how these authorial metafictional mobilize a sense of self that is vigorous, interconnected, and not limited to discrete narrative trajectories of history or culture.

I should note, however, that this gathering of self-conscious fiction is not necessarily—or not always equally—ethnically self-conscious. In other words, in terms of content, the main factor in choosing these texts is their prominent portrayals of homodiegetic author-characters, rather than the texts' overt dealings with the nature of ethnicity. By focusing on transethnic metafiction as a means of exploring differing viewpoints on ethnic identity, I thus attempt to avoid Mwangi's own criticism against Jablon, who, as Mwangi argues, conflates modes of blackness by having a monolithic approach to the genre (Mwangi 25). I further seek to avoid replicating criticisms weighed against works for their content at expense of their form, as happened with Hurston's *Their Eyes were Watching God*, a text deemed not overtly political enough in its time, but which others including Jablon identify as foundational to black metafiction (4-5). Hurston's own assertions of her authority and authorship in the face of literary expectations of African American political involvement become thematized in these metafictional texts that employ marginal forms of storytelling and self-expression.

Moreover, this project's focus on American ethnicities is not necessarily or exclusively tied to texts featuring immigration or the immigrant experience. In other words, I consider this new phase of transethnic American literature to encompass not just

what Bharati Mukherjee—in describing literature by foreign-born Americans and their children—calls the “Literature of New Arrival” (685), but also the literature of ethnic Americans even further removed from their immigrant roots. While not intending to imply that one ethnic group is the same as another and while remaining aware of distinct centers of ethnic power and privilege, I nonetheless do not propose that we can ultimately draw definite lines as to what counts as ethnic American literature and what does not. Instead, by focusing first on fictional representations of authors, I work inductively to derive a theory of the self as it relates to the formation of 21st-century American identities, regardless of whether these narratives fit common or stereotypical opinions of what “ethnic Americanness” is or should be. Following Ronald Takaki, Wai Chee Dimock, and others, I argue through both my analysis and methodology for the value in considering other paradigms of American literature beyond reading through single ethnic groupings, or solely studying “typical” ethnic-related themes like immigration, colonialism, and racism. The nature of the transethnic emphasizes dialogue across previously inflexible rubrics of identity in order to challenge current attitudes about ethnicity in general; we can thus no longer study these works in isolation if we want to understand the diverse and dynamic cultures that Americans have begun to inhabit.

In fact, Chapter 2, entitled “The Marginalization of the Author: Breakdown, Visibility, and the Female Postcolonial Subject in Gina Apostol’s *Gun Dealers’ Daughter* and Louise Erdrich’s *Shadow Tag*,” looks to a Filipino American author and a Native American author to analyze how the transethnic process of self-authorship can acknowledge the U.S.’s role in imperial oppression domestically and abroad. In this

chapter, I maintain that Apostol and Erdrich's texts emphasize the impossibility of the complete and visible subject. Instead, the protagonists Sol and Irene engage in acts of subversive writing—obscurity, indirection, irrationality, and subterranean or secretive writing—that they have adopted in the face of the nation-state's willful amnesia of colonialism and imperialism. Through their writing, the protagonists Sol and Irene display mental states that resist closure and embrace confusion, instability, and unknowability as protest against the assimilation of legible ethnic subjects. Their indirect and obscure ways of writing about themselves and their experiences prove dissonant with the kinds of storytelling and identities that multiculturalism values, demonstrating that marginalization will persist while only certain forms of subjectivity are deemed acceptable or important.

The next chapter, "Against 'Authenticity': Collaboration, Authority, and Witnessing in Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated*," expands upon the idea of "acceptable" subjects and forms of storytelling by reframing liars, plagiarizers, and unreliable narrators as ethical and collaborative storytellers, in turn emphasizing transethnic metafiction's facility in highlighting instabilities of truth, testimony, and power. Responding to Édouard Glissant's characterizations of the removed observer and the involved participant, this chapter considers the protagonists of Díaz and Foer's novels as writers whose authorship unexpectedly lead to life-changing relationships and a sense of responsibility and connection. Facing the impossibility of authentic representations and storytelling, the protagonists find that their roles as witnesses implicate them in the events that they

portray, giving them power not only over how events are told but also how they unfold. Through their increased accountability in stories in which they are supposed to remain uninvolved, and even through supposedly dishonorable forms of storytelling, these protagonists challenge the existence of authentic versions of ethnic identity and storytelling.

Chapter 4 delves into how ethnicity is shaped in relation to material objects, objectification, and the traversal of fictional and political borders. “‘Enlightened by All Myriad Things’: Material Metafiction in Nicole Krauss’s *Great House* and Ruth Ozeki’s *A Tale for the Time Being*” places objects at the center of authorial analysis. For the author-protagonists of the texts, certain material things related to authorship can hold cultural memories and underscore human intersubjectivity by exposing nationality and exceptionalism as isolating and counterproductive modes of self-expression. Instead, artifacts can reframe ethnic identity via transnational and yet personal moments of connection. More specifically, items like the desk in Krauss’s novel redefine the characters and help us examine how belonging can manifest itself through relationships that complicate the national bonds and exceptional figures celebrated by American multiculturalism. Further exploring the importance of the metafictional form to transethnicity, this chapter also emphasizes how transethnicity allows us to read through and across narrative borders and travel between storyworlds—a narratological practice known as metalepsis—underscoring the ability of fiction to influence real life, and vice versa.

Expanding the metaleptic real world-fiction crossover/connection of the previous chapter, chapter 5 makes a case for nuanced biographical readings as well as an expanded viewpoint on authorship to include collaborative genres like jokes, historical reimaginings and revisions, and even subversive digital genres like spam. “‘A Blank Page Rises Up’: Expanding the Scales of Transethnic Authorship in Percival Everett’s *Percival Everett* by Virgil Russell and Miguel Syjuco’s *Ilustrado*” additionally focuses on how fragmentation, polyvocality, and a blurring of the roles of author and narrator call into question multicultural limitations that stem expressly from literary criticism. The forms in which these novels are presented more closely mimic the scattered ways that we tend to understand each other, particularly in digital or online interactions. Blurring authorial and character identities thus encourages readers to challenge beliefs in existing defining markers like nationality or separations like fiction and non-fiction as “natural,” and to subsequently confront the limitations of what constitutes ethnic American writing and literary interactions in the first place. Finally, I argue that Everett and Syjuco compel readers to consider the humanity of their authorial characters alongside the real-life authors themselves, showing that writing can remake ethnic and national identity and, in turn, speak back to entrenched sociopolitical beliefs as well as ossified categories of ethnic literature.

The concluding chapter “Releasing Doubles into the World. . .” returns to the idea of Ellison’s nuanced and comprehensive Americanness to underscore how transethnicity can highlight the self-conflicted humanity of people of all ethnicities. The narrators of Mat Johnson’s *Pym* and Laymon’s *Long Division* confront literal and literary

ghosts, allowing for investigations of the ghostly “deaths” of the author, authorial doubles, as well as literary traditions. This chapter connects these and previously discussed novels to themes of allusion, doubling, and the dead subject in order to underline the related forms that transethnicity has taken throughout history. I also look forward in time to tease out the implications of this philosophy in relation to current events, policy, and future approaches to racially-motivated injustice and oppression. Finally, I posit that transethnicity can lead to a postmodernism of transauthorship, one that makes postmodern elements like metafiction more accessible in order to authorize readers to define themselves transethnically.

CHAPTER II

THE MARGINALIZATION OF THE AUTHOR: BREAKDOWN, VISIBILITY, AND
THE FEMALE POSTCOLONIAL SUBJECT IN GINA APOSTOL'S *GUN DEALERS'*
DAUGHTER AND LOUISE ERDRICH'S *SHADOW TAG*

As a therapeutic exercise, Sol, the protagonist of Gina Apostol's *The Gun Dealers' Daughter*, writes and rewrites her life story, treating this obsessive act of composition as penance for perceived betrayals of her fellow student revolutionaries, her gun-dealing parents, and her twinned nations of the United States and the Philippines. At the same time, however, her writing of autobiographical moments in her past—what in the Filipino language of Tagalog is called a *talambuhay*—is an anti-therapy, a rebellion against the advice her counselors give her to overcome her fixation with history. “To remain well,” Sol writes, “I must find ways to feel at ease. *Live in the moment*. A corny slogan I gather from my doctors. An octogenarian chorus bleats in my brain. Recovery, they say, means learning to exist in the present tense. It is a delusion of my memory that my past exists at all” (25). While Sol thus attempts to assimilate to both Philippine and United States ideals that value the present over the past, her ultimate failure in this regard—that is, her refusal to engage in this corrected act of writing—shows how the outside world's rejection of her identity has incited an internal feud between her body and mind. Sol's pathology stems from her inability to write “in the present tense” and, as a result of this sickness, she is deemed broken and incomprehensible.

American liberal multiculturalists defend minority cultures under a guise of wholeness that would automatically exclude someone like Sol. This exclusion is surprising given the rise in the early 1980s of “postcolonial multiculturalism”—that is, critics’ expansion of multiculturalism beyond classically recognized ethnic European and African American subjects to include ethno-racial subjects of American imperialism like Native and Filipino Americans.¹⁶ Classical multicultural theory and this postcolonial variant imply, and often outright describe, a whole subject capable of rational discourse and readily translatable behavior—that is, a coherent identity, distinguishable from other similarly coherent figures. Sol’s insistence on obscure and indirect writing constitutes her activist, transethnic authorship, showing how the condition of the postcolonial subject is exacerbated by multiculturalism’s rhetoric of inclusiveness and its denial of U.S. imperialist history.

The way that postcolonialism fits into the ever-changing schema of U.S. multiculturalism is itself variable and complicated. Notably, most studies of the intersections between postcolonialism and multiculturalism focus on their contexts within Australia, France, England, and Canada,¹⁷ in part because these nations’ involvement in past colonial activities are comparatively uncontested by their residents. In a *San Francisco Chronicle* op-ed piece, Brian Ascalon Roley remarks that “in France, the French know why there are so many Algerians in Paris, and in England, the British know why there are so many Indians in London. But most Americans don’t even realize that

¹⁶ While I suggest a specific meaning for this term in the context of the United States, Pacific Rim scholars like Jessica Carniel, Daniel P.S. Goh, and Philip Holden have also applied the concept of postcolonial multiculturalism to a historicized evolution of state practices specific to Australia, Malaysia, and Singapore.

¹⁷ See, for example, Chanady, Docker, Gunew, and Mookherjee.

there are so many Filipinos in this country, let alone why.” Roley draws attention to the ways that American multicultural rhetoric has covered over U.S. colonial history, specifically their involvement in the Philippines in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The presence of Filipinos in America is instead “like a disembodied shade, in an intermediate state of ambiguous existence for an indefinite period” (Isaac xxiv). Meanwhile, within Native American contexts, the notion of post/colonialism is similarly troubled, as the prefix “post-” implies a state of decolonization that is not a reality for many indigenous Americans. Arnold Krupat notes that Native American culture and literature exist in a condition of “*ongoing* colonialism” (32, emphasis mine). Eric Cheyfitz adds that many of the federally recognized Native American tribal members in Alaska and the contiguous United States are even today beholden to “the colonial agenda of federal Indian law. Thus, Alaska Natives and tribally enrolled Indians find themselves negotiating in their daily lives a complex dialectic of the colonial and the postcolonial” (5). The Native Americans’ “ambiguous status as quasi nations” (Magdaleno 279) therefore finds some similarities with Filipinos’ ambiguous presence. Sol’s obscure and incomprehensible authorship and actions attempt to capture such peculiarities of living in a country whose government claims paternal dominance over one’s nation of birth.¹⁸

Authors such as Apostol and Louise Erdrich challenge postcolonial multiculturalism’s pursuit of visibility and presumptions of wholeness and transparency

¹⁸ Throughout this text, I refer to “nations” as applying both to country’s with commonly accepted political borders—like the Philippines or the United States—as well as indigenous nations like the Ojibwe (also known as Anishnaabe or Chippewa) Nation, a group who spans Canada and the U.S. Chris Bongie uses the term “post/colonial” to refer to “two words and worlds appear uneasily as one, joined together and yet also divided in a relation of (dis)continuity” (13). The usage invokes Ania Loomba’s usage of the slash to indicate a similar relationality in her *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*.

in their novels, showing how change is not possible when only certain forms of subjectivity are deemed acceptable or important. Sol and Irene, the respective protagonists from Apostol's *Gun Dealers' Daughter* and Erdrich's *Shadow Tag*, for instance, engage in acts of subversive writing, revealing mental states that not only resist closure, but embrace confusion, obscurity, and instability as protest against assimilative preferences for whole and rational subjects. Their indirect and obscure ways of writing about themselves and their experiences prove dissonant with the kinds of storytelling and identities that multiculturalism values. In fact, such transethnic obscurity is in response to what David Theo Goldberg notes is multiculturalism's conflation of "epistemological universalism with the political, ethical, and pedagogical axiology of universality, of the common and modern Man of Reason (that one on the Clapham Bus—no acquaintance of mine), the product of Western civ and partial consumer of the Great Book(s)" (Goldberg 16). In his mention of the man on Clapham omnibus, Goldberg invokes a commonplace in British law, "the ordinary reasonable man" against whom defendants are measured (McCaughran 615).¹⁹ Similarly, in describing the liberal philosophy behind his famous multicultural "politics of recognition," Charles Taylor points to the foundation for his approach as beginning with rational and self-sufficient agents who, once given the "vital human need" of recognition, will finally be seen—and see themselves—with value (Taylor 41, 57, 26).

¹⁹ As Ryan Austin sardonically explains, the term "man on the Clapham omnibus" is "synonymous with the pinnacle of reason in humanity: an ordinary London transit rider as representative of all rational thought and action."

More significantly, Anne Phillips and Jodi Melamed argue that multiculturalism assimilates its subjects by insisting upon self-sufficiency and cogency as minimum requirements for participation in a diverse Western society. Phillips posits that multiculturalism's impulse of reducible categorization exemplifies an attempt "to explain behavior in non-Western societies or among individuals from racialized minority groups, and the implied contrast with rational, autonomous (Western) individuals, whose actions are presumed to reflect moral judgments, and who can be held individually responsible for those actions and beliefs" (9). Multiculturalist standards therefore begin with the idea of the "cultured" subject as someone who is neither postcolonial nor traumatized by such experiences to the point of losing a sense of self. Melamed implies that distinctions like the one the Phillips mentions further justify inequality in the United States. She notes,

liberal-multicultural knowledges articulated the biopolitical and rational together to a high degree to explain the simultaneous upward (for a very few) and downward expansion (for most) of life chances in African American communities, on American Indian reservations, in urban Indian country, in the traditional and new locations of Chicano/a and Latino/a life, and amid diverse and increasingly class-stratified Asian American and Asian immigrant populations (35).

The theorists contend that the association between rational and autonomous subjects and Western multicultural ideals is so pervasive as to be invisible. Any subjects who do not fit into the paradigm are deemed to have been unfit for Western society in the first place. It is no coincidence, then, that rationality is upheld by those like Sol's parents and by Sol and Irene's doctors, all of whom deem the obsessive and obscure writing stemming from irrationality and trauma as incorrect and inappropriate.

In *Woman, Native, Other*, Trinh Minh-ha likens the divide between linguistic clarity and obscurity to the differences separating writers from activists. Parroting the idiom of academia and the multicultural university, Trinh notes, “To use the language well, says the voice of literacy, cherish its classic form. . . . Obscurity is an imposition on the reader” (17). While she partially concedes this point, Trinh adds, “beware when you cross railroad tracks for one train may hide another train. Clarity is a means of subjection, a quality both of official, taught language and of *correct writing*, two old mates of power: together they flow, together they flower, vertically, to impose an order” (17-18, emphasis mine). Trinh claims that writers and activists can derive power from obscurity and dysfunction, that some authority is actually lost in outright clarity. By writing, as Trinh might say, *incorrectly*, Sol and Irene blur the lines between the activist and the writer, using dissonant writing to reveal the limitations and insurmountable contradictions of postcolonial multiculturalism. In fact, Trinh emphasizes that women have the power to write in order to access that which has become suppressed and devalued by patriarchal constructions of writing and identity.²⁰ Focusing on such activist writing, this chapter illustrates how Irene and Sol mobilize transethnicity—that is, metafictional acts of authorship that theorize ways to reimagine ethnicity in the face of multicultural restrictions—in order to complicate and reconstruct the subject by strategic use of

²⁰ Trinh, for example, complicates Virginia Woolf’s construction of a room of one’s own by pointing out that a “woman’s room, despite its new seductive paneling, can become a prison as soon as it takes on the appearance of a lady’s room (masculine notion of femininity) or a female’s room (male alter ego). The danger in going ‘the woman’s way’ is precisely that we may stop midway and limit ourselves to a series of reactions: instead of walking on, we are content with opposing woman(’s emotion) to man(’s abstraction)” (29). In other words, not every kind of writing that a woman takes on is necessarily in the vein of responding to patriarchy and/or upholding decolonization. Apostol and Erdrich, then, highlight a specific kind of women’s writing that is activist in its non-linearity, content, and style.

obscurity and dysfunction. Such scenes reveal Sol and Irene to be dissonant exceptions to subject categories officially recognized by American multiculturalist ideologies.

Both novelists hone in on moments of transethnic writing—subversive and “incorrect” acts of authorship that highlight subjectivities disregarded by postcolonial multiculturalism. Erdrich’s Ojibwe protagonist Irene keeps a secret journal—a blue notebook in which she ruminates on the abusive and invasive actions of her husband Gil, a man haunted by historical depictions of Native Americans. Rather than attempting to appease Gil, Irene hides her conflicted feelings in her blue notebook, while in her red diary—which Gil surreptitiously reads— she writes accounts that mostly incite his anger and destructiveness. Meanwhile, Apostol’s Filipina American protagonist Sol defies the doctors’ orders by telling and retelling her past in the Philippines under the regime of the dictator Ferdinand Marcos. Now living in a labyrinthine retreat in New York, Sol’s writes her life story, or *talambuhay*, in order to emphasize her exclusion from what is deemed as normal life in the present.

In opposition to multicultural ideals of wholeness and wellness and its tidy and reducible categories of identity, these protagonists’ dissonant authorship emerges in moments of obscurity and mental breakdown. Borrowing from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Camilla Griggers reinscribes mental breakdown as productive, that these moments reveal the unspeakable and the unrepresentable (105). While conventional wisdom situates mental illness as occurring solely within the body, Griggers expands this outward, revealing how the “nervous system” that produces the moment of breakdown derives not from the female subject, but from the structure that orders the “abstract social

organization of the feminine” (106) in the first place. In other words, rather than showing women’s breakdowns as signs of debility, Griggers suggests that such moments are a larger sign of breakdown in the social body as a whole; the problem that incites this breakdown stems not from the individual, but from the network of nervous systems that delimit subjectivity. Women’s bodies become a kind of canary in the coalmine, mental breakdown indicating a problem with the nation at large. For Sol and Irene, that problem stems from bewilderment with the social and institutional practices of classical multiculturalism in the United States, a nation that supposedly champions cultural and ethnic diversity, but ignores its own involvement in imperial oppression.²¹ Rather than addressing the wider problem of incongruous inclusion and imperial secrecy, Sol and Irene’s doctors, family, and friends view their writerly attempts to underscore these incongruities as pathological or unproductive.

Nonetheless, ethnic studies critics like Jasbir Puar and Lisa Cacho actually call attention to violent assimilation and exclusion incorporated into basic multicultural tenets, difficulties that are compounded by Sol and Irene’s unique and contradictory experiences of Americanness. These assimilative, pluralist impulses, while often pursued with the best intentions, marginalize subjects whose understanding of themselves—and,

²¹ See, for example, Charles Taylor’s exploration of equality’s connection to multicultural diversity (68). In terms of the United States, Watson, et. al. argues that this country has a very particular brand of multiculturalism, with an emphasis on ethnicity. Other countries differ in terms of this emphasis on recognition and tolerance – Britain, for example, equates multiculturalism primarily with the promotion of religious diversity (Watson 102). Some feminist critics such as Susan Moller Okin see multiculturalism’s emphasis on cultural groups as being injurious to women’s rights, while others like Ayelet Shachar, Sarah Song, Chandra Mohanty, and Seyla Benhabib take a more nuanced approach to the conflicts that arise when the “claims of moral and political autonomy contradict the pluralist preservation of multicultural traditions that seem to make no room for such autonomy” (Benhabib 101), thus attempting to show the ways that multiculturalism and feminism are not mutually exclusive, but instead require intricate negotiations within both arenas.

in Sol and Irene's case, their history, sexuality, and ethnicity—does not fit into the framework of the multicultural being. Jack Citrin notes that defenders of multiculturalism like Charles Taylor “hold that membership in a ‘societal culture’ with its own language and history is necessary for the individual’s dignity and self-realization” (247). While this sentiment has become fairly commonplace, such assumptions of unproblematic membership are complicated by Sol and Irene’s isolation from their supposed “domestic” cultures. The unrepresentability of their lives and the lack of visibility of their stories and experiences within their homes and homelands lead to their moments of breakdown. It is no coincidence that both women are seemingly trapped within the oppressive walls of their family homes; these characters’ compositions expose how multiculturalism’s promises of liberty and equality are not always accessible to female postcolonial subjects, even in the most seemingly safe and sacred spaces. Trinh states, “To write is to become. Not to become a writer (or a poet), but to become, intransitively” (18-19). By authoring their personal narratives in ways that defy conventional or “correct” beliefs of wholeness and belonging, Irene and Sol reveal how they exist in a constantly evolving and dynamic state of becoming.

Delusions of Memory: Unearthing American Imperialist History in *The Gun Dealer’s Daughter*

Perhaps the great American Republic, whose interests lie in the Pacific and who has no hand in the spoliation of Africa, may some day dream of foreign possession. This is not impossible, for the example is contagious; covetousness and ambition are among the strongest vices. . . . North

America would be quite a troublesome rival, if she should once get into the business.

--Jose Rizal, "The Philippines: A Century Hence" (1889-90)

Gina Apostol's novel *Gun Dealers' Daughter* (2012) begins with a circular and repetitious enactment of the death and the reappearance of the author. Because the text opens with a description of Uncle Gianni picking up a girl at an airport (3), readers can reasonably guess that Gianni must be the main character. However, in a deliberately jarring modification, one of many metafictional interruptions that occur throughout the novel drawing readers out of the narrative world, the perspective shifts to first person as the narrator tells herself to "*Revise that. . . .* He [that is, Gianni] held *me* by the sleeve, gently" (3, emphasis mine).²² The announced revision and disorienting switch in narrative focus extends to the scene itself, as "the girl" or the "I" of the text is whisked past flashing camera bulbs, a film crew, and "curious onlookers" (3). Readers begin to sense that the girl must be central not just to the text, but to the eruption of paparazzi-like activity in the airport; the narrator revising the scene must be a celebrity—someone prominent, talented, and beautiful. Then again, Gianni disproves this assumption, offhandedly observing that the crew is filming a commercial. The girl is once more relegated to the backdrop. The scene ends with the narrator musing, "in a cutting room somewhere, freeze-framed, on the margins of that black-clad crowd posing to sell

²² As mentioned in the introduction, Patricia Waugh defines metafiction as "fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality" (2). Sol's announcements of her revisions throughout the text thus signal both Apostol's conscious drawing out of the reader to the novel's construction, as well as Sol's attempts to revise and reenvision (re-vision) history.

condoms or perfume, a girl's stricken face—my face—looks down, denying evidence of its arrival" (4).

This mystifying cycle of disappearance and return recurs throughout the girl's storytelling in ways related to mental breakdown and revolution, signifying her thwarted attempts to write herself as an independent subject. The narrator, Soledad (or Sol), composes against her marginalization, seeking corrective discourse despite historical erasures of postcolonial subjects in the United States. Her cycle of reappearance, disappearance, revision, and rewriting mimic her ethnic group's history and reveal what Allan Punzalan Isaac observes as Filipino Americans' simultaneous presence and absence in the United States, not to mention postmodernism's accounts of the author's supposed death and return. Isaac notes that Filipino Americans "live as a testament to America's imperial past. . . . Traces of this imperial past are indeed 'everywhere,' as the many pockets of Filipino communities show, and 'nowhere,' as American public memory and vision effectively overlook the Filipino and absentmindedly ask, 'What American empire?'" (xxiii-xxiv). The quantitative presence of the Filipino Americans, one of the largest Asian American communities in the U.S., is countered by the fact that this same population shares a unique postcolonial relation with the United States that is deliberately ignored. Sol's emergence in Apostol's novel is consequently tentative, a spectral presence fighting, however indistinctly, for space on the page. Rather than attaining the visibility implied in the promise of postcolonial multiculturalism, both Sol and her writing instead remain elusive and impenetrable.

Sol's death and return as a writer are further literalized in her faulty attempts at suicide. She arrives at the airport with bandages covering her slashed wrists, and later tries to drown herself only to realize "I am no Ophelia. I'm a floater" (5). In addition to drawing attention to thwarted attempts at visibility, these distressing moments of appearance and return replicate a forgotten event in American and Philippine history: namely, the Philippine-American War beginning in 1898 and leading to eventual independence in 1946, both now invisible, unspoken parts of American history. Of particular interest to several characters in *Gun Dealers' Daughter* including the history student Sol is the Balangiga Massacre, which commonly refers to the 1901 conquest of American Army soldiers during the Philippine-American War by Filipino independence fighters in Balangiga, a municipality in Samar.²³ For Sol, what happened in Samar symbolizes the existing state of U.S.-Philippine relations, as well as her own inner conflict as an American and a Filipino. In rewriting the meaning of the Balangiga Massacre, Sol simultaneously attempts to revise (or re-envision) her own life story, showing how her exclusions as a Filipino American reproduce U.S. erasures of Filipino history.

The breakdown incited by the awareness of this historical suppression makes Sol and her writing impulsive and erratic; not only does she engage in revision and reappearance, but she also deals in obscurity and uncertainty in both her writing and her

²³ While the United States retained military bases in the Philippines after the fact, both countries agreed to Philippine independence on July 4, 1946, almost 50 years after General Emilio Aguinaldo proclaimed independence from Spain for the Philippines in 1898. Sharon Delmendo suggests that even 1946 as the year of Philippine independence is problematic since latter independence was awarded by the United States rather than won by the Filipinos. Delmendo suggests September 28, 1901—the date of the Balangiga Massacre—as a possible alternative (198).

life, to the chagrin of her psychiatrist, her parents and Uncle Gianni, and her Filipino revolutionary friends. As her doctor tells her, “Your story is a poison pill—do you understand that? And you keep eating it up—your toxic trauma. . . You must try to move forward, instead of backward, in time” (282). Sol refuses to compose herself in ways that please others. Her writing protests American erasures of their shared history with the Filipinos not through recuperating what is lost in that erasure, but by reinscribing the subject herself to combat an impossible wholeness, clarity, and visibility. She realizes that what she aptly referred to as “dislocation” from the Philippines “sickened me even more. . . than my lingering illness—or was it that the recidivism of my internal glands was the abject correlative of my infirmity, my incurable sense of who I am” (83). In the metafictional term “abject correlative,” Sol combines T.S. Eliot’s notion of the objective correlative, which refers to an element that conveys a character’s emotional state to the reader, with Judith Butler’s idea of the abject—what Butler refers to as the “‘unlivable’ and ‘uninhabitable’ zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject” (3). In her writing, Sol thus reveals the distance between composition and composure, showing her readers how her own story will enact moments of reappearance and disappearance and will thrive in obscurity in order to mimic and then problematize the whitewashing of Filipino Americans throughout history. Sol recognizes that “true” Americans take their own colonial history against the British as a source of national pride, while at the same time obscuring their own acts of colonialism against others. In contrast, her native foreignness, or foreign nativeness, prevents her from claiming a similar history.

Placing the mentally distressed Sol in present-day New York City further forces readers to connect these historical moments in the Philippines to 9/11 and the United States' prolonged wars against terrorism. American history's branding of the Balangiga independence fighters as "insurgents" attacking benevolent, unsuspecting American soldiers echoes not only the essentialist treatment of Arab Americans after 9/11, but also contributes directly to the ways Filipino Americans are seen—or not seen—today. In an interview with Laurel Fantauzzo, Apostol hints that Americans believe racial and class divides happen elsewhere, not in the United States. "People like to talk about the corruption of the Third World, whatever that is," she says. "Manhattan, Manila. There is a reason those are twinned in my novel." It is no surprise that Bob Couttie's book jacket for *Hang the Dogs* refers to the Balangiga massacre as "the 9/11 of its day," thus characterizing the Filipinos as if they were extremist terrorists invading American soil, and not native citizens fighting off foreign occupiers.²⁴

The shared but unacknowledged Philippine-American history in Balangiga further exposes the inadequacies of multiculturalists' efforts to include the female ethnic American subject, particularly when that subject emerges out of decolonizing countries in political upheaval. While the ethnic category, "Filipino American," appears to include all

²⁴ Most—if not all—U.S. military archival references to this conflict can be found under the heading of "Philippine Insurrection," the characterization marking Filipino guerilla fighters as insurgents rather than colonial subjects. Further, Laura Wexler notes that the United States practiced waterboarding (or the "water cure" [Wexler 28]) during the Philippine-American War, a procedure Elisa Massimino and others note was notoriously used in relation to 9/11. Other critics who draw parallels between American actions in response to 9/11 and U.S. treatment of Filipinos in Balangiga and during the Philippine-American War include Louise Barnett, Gregg Jones, and Stanley Karnow. Writing in to the U.S. military news publication, *Stars and Stripes*, Maj. Michael Van Hoven further points to parallels between Balangiga and American dealings with counterinsurgents in Afghanistan, reading Couttie's account of Balangiga as "very insightful material that will greatly contribute to our present counterinsurgency campaign" in Afghanistan.

Filipinos and their descendants in the United States, the distinctions that prompt Sol's alienation from her affluent, globe-trotting parents' native country continue to haunt her in America. Sol exists in a perpetual state of foreign exception, exemplifying in her marginalization what Lisa Lowe calls the "foreigner-within" (5). In fact, Lowe's characterization hinges upon the contradictions in Asian Americans' integration into the national polity: They often enjoy some agency in the economic workforce, for example, but are marginalized in language and law. Sol's economic privilege paradoxically obviates her need to work, thus barring her from the primary sense of inclusion that Lowe suggests would be most accessible to her in multicultural America. Sol thus remains a perpetual foreigner in multiple senses of the word. Her subsequent inability to feel at home in her supposed home country is a constant burden that mentally scars her body and mind. America's refusal to acknowledge its imperial history in the Philippines prevents Sol from truly feeling as though she belongs in the U.S., whose native language is her first language, whose major metropolis she calls home, and whose rhetoric of multiculturalism advertises a welcoming call that ultimately excludes her.

Riffing on Rey Chow's ideas of the ascendancy of whiteness, Jasbir Puar enumerates the limits of liberal multiculturalism, stating that "what little acceptance liberal diversity proffers in the way of inclusion is highly mediated by huge realms of exclusion: the ethnic is usually straight, usually has access to material and cultural capital (both as a consumer and as an owner), and is in fact often male" (Puar 25). As a heterosexual female who benefits from her parents' wealth, Sol mostly fulfills the criteria that Puar describes, but her marginalization from both Philippine and American society

nonetheless exclude her from any real American experiences in the present, trapping her in historical moments of another country's past. Thus, to Puar's formation of the acceptable ethnic American subject, or what she calls the "good ethnic" (32), I add the willful forgetting of American imperialism and oppression. In other words, Sol's inability to accept historical omissions of United States' imperialist practices in both her life and writing exposes the limits of multicultural inclusiveness. What Edward Said observed as the perceived willingness of American scholars to discuss every kind of imperialism except their own has given Filipino Americans a status of invisibility shared with other multicultural groups like Chicano and Native Americans (Campomanes 33). Through her subversive writing, Sol reveals the conflict inherent in claiming Filipino American subjectivity, showing an urgent necessity for a transethnic conception of the self. Sol's refusal to achieve wellness by ceasing to write about the past is thus a protest against multiculturalism's conditional promise of acceptance.

Sol's conflicted acts of composition—exemplified in the *talambuhay* she writes in New York and the constant revision that takes place throughout the novel—create a new culture, dependent on less conventional tools than those suggested by her doctors, family, and friends. Rather than writing about, or fighting for visibility in, the present, Sol obsesses about the past to the point of mental breakdown. Griggers counters this concept of getting well by forgetting the past when she notes,

From the point of view of cultural healing, what the traumatized subject needs is not a chemically induced repressed memory and prosthetic personality, but the reintegration, molecularization, and group expression of her fractal memories and disconnected affects and desires, not only within the private sphere of her own

individual psyche and in her direct relations to the institutional workings of the nervous system, but within the public sphere of collective representations of embodied social reality. Accomplishing such a molecular politics would require of the traumatized feminine subject not only the ability to remember and articulate publicly violence's past and her role in that past but also the capacity to forget—not as an act of repression, but as a conscious act of deterritorializing the politics of desire and the social process of subjectification at the micropolitical level of her own memories, emotions, and desires. (133, emphasis hers)

Rather than repressing or inhibiting the patient, Griggers suggests, what is needed is for American society as a whole to reassess its methods of responding to its subjects. Thus, until Sol's memories, behaviors, and interpretations of history are acknowledged, valued, and dealt with, she will continue to be haunted by this lack of control. Sol and those like her who live in the nation that laid claim to their country of birth can thus draw attention to oppression in both public and private spheres, showing how it manifests itself in what Griggers calls the "nervous system"—in this case, the American national imaginary, as well as individual bodies, in the present.²⁵ In other words, Sol's mental condition, particularly as it relates to her obsession with writing about the past, illustrates that multiculturalism's claim to inclusiveness cannot begin to be fully enacted unless we first contend with the ghosts of our imperial past on multiple levels of remembering. Sol's breakdown is a transethnic response to a systemic failure to include the postcolonial subject in this present formation of American memory and history. Consequently,

²⁵ Borrowing from Michael Taussig, Griggers describes this wider, external nervous system as "the historical outcome of a legacy of disorganized violences. . . [that] now energizes a postmodern regime of arbitrariness and planning in the post World War II reconfiguration of state, market, and transnational corporations" (107). Griggers adds that this nervous system "produces women as victims/survivors, self-mutilators, dysfunctionals, and designated crazies. Within that ground of being, to adapt (to not suicide) is to (mal)adapt" (110). I use Griggers and Taussig's constructions to show how Sol and Irene's breakdowns are indicative of problems in American multicultural practices, particularly its privileging of a certain kind of reasonable and coherent subject and its covering over of U.S. imperial histories.

forgetting America's militaristic enforcements in the Philippines in the past is a luxury that Sol cannot yet enjoy. Her stubborn insistence on writing about history thus exemplifies what Bow calls creative activism, a rebellion juxtaposed to the failed revolutions that beset U.S.-Philippine relations in the past and the present. Bow writes, "If women have reason to be, in terms Adrienne Rich has borrowed, 'disloyal to civilization,' then this betrayal of racism, patriarchy, or a repressive state constitutes a form of creative activism for Asian American women" (11). In her mind, Sol recognizes that her preoccupation with obscurity (in the face of historical invisibility) and her disinclination to write her life story "correctly" are thus socially impermissible betrayals of those around her.

While *Gun Dealers' Daughter* opens in present-day New York, flashbacks apprise readers of an impending crisis in the Philippines in the 1980s. President Marcos—identified in the book only as "The Dictator"—declares martial law and orders paramilitary groups to kidnap, bomb, and mutilate so-called insurgents protesting poverty and ill government treatment. Meanwhile, in a student revolutionary group protesting Marcos's actions, Sol's privilege and insecurity relegate her to the role of a U.F. or "Useful Fool. . . a sympathizer with dim potential" (292, 68). Sheltered from the realities of the people suffering and dying kilometers away from her front door, Sol nonetheless longs to fit in with the group and its leaders—her rich, disaffected neighbor Jed de Rivera Morga and his girlfriend, the charismatic firebrand Soli, short for Solidaridad.²⁶ The

²⁶ While the connections are too elaborate to describe here, Apostol's text is dense with allusions to historical figures. Soli's full name refers to José Rizal's *La Solidaridad* (the Solidarity), which Soli identifies as "the journal of the propagandists of the 1880s" (81). Interestingly, in his *History of the Filipino*

doubling and mirroring of the protagonist Sol Soliman and the community leader Solidaridad Soledad is portentous: Sol envies Soli's fortitude and activism, but will nevertheless betray her multiple times before the novel's end, not only in her sexual and emotional affair with Jed, but also in stealing Gianni and her parents' munitions to propel the revolution in a direction that pacifist Soli disapproves, culminating in the murder of Colonel Grier, a fictional U.S. military representative in the Philippines.²⁷ When Sol gets kicked out of the group for her sexual relationship with Jed, she realizes that the group's definition of wholeness and visibility differs from her own, and that she "was no comrade anyhow until [she] handed in the *T.B.*, the *talambuhay*: my reckoning of my life" (134). In other words, not unlike multiculturalism's demands of rationality and clarity, the revolutionaries demand a particular identity, ethical lifestyle, and political and emotional sensibility that do not account for Sol's uncommon subject position. More specifically, the group leader Ka Noli equates Sol's *talambuhay* with an expression of her "class relation to the masses" (134), arguing that her relative privilege demands extra penance.²⁸

People, Teodoro Agoncillo refers to *La Solidaridad* in the short form as both the *Sol* and the *Soli*. Similarly, Jed's name may be a reference to Spanish colonial official Antonio de Morga, whose history on Spanish colonization in the Philippines, *Sucesos de las Islas Filipinas* (1609) was republished and annotated (read: revised and corrected for accuracy) by one of the aforementioned propagandists and Philippine national hero Rizal in Paris in 1890. The Brown University "History of Printing in the Philippines" webpage notes that Rizal's dedication in his Spanish edition of de Morga's text states that if the text "succeeds to awaken your consciousness of our past, already effaced from your memory, and to rectify what has been falsified and slandered, then I have not worked in vain, and with this as a basis, however small it may be, we shall be able to steady the future." Not unlike Sol, Rizal writes with a similar intention of reminding readers of a forgotten moment in history.

²⁷ Given Sol's present entrapment in New York, it is notable that Sol's writing names the American colonel while leaving Marcos unnamed in the background. Sol makes clear who has a stronger hold on her psyche. The contradictory acts of naming might also be a reference to the racist tendencies Joseph Schott has in naming and not naming certain Filipino and American revolutionary figures (see the next section for more on Schott).

²⁸ The character of Ka Noli writes the PSR, which Sol describes as "a shortcut term for an analytic manual of people's war" (130). Ka Noli may thus refer to Filemon Lagman, a socialist activist known by many as

Her gender does not help either; while Jed is in many ways more economically privileged (and maybe more spoiled and sheltered) than Sol, he does not suffer the same punishment from their affair. The other women of the group, such as Soli, primarily work by themselves, either of their own volition or in response to the perceived marginalization of the largely patriarchal student group members.²⁹

While Sol is well aware—and even ashamed—of her family’s wealth and their complicity with the Dictator and his wife Imelda Marcos (referred to by Sol only as “the Lady”), Sol’s openly sexual relationship with Jed and her undue preoccupation with history have no place in the revolution. Before Sol’s ousting, Soli attacks Sol’s obsession with history books, demanding, “Why do history books persuade you but not the world around you? You live in a puppet totalitarian regime, propped up by guns from America, so that we are no sovereign country but a mere outpost of foreign interests in the Far East” (122). Here Soli tactfully leaves out mentioning Sol’s parents’ involvement. Rather, akin to her doctors in New York, Soli asserts that the present has more importance over—and little relevance to—the past, and is accordingly more deserving of her creative focus.

The lasting effects of the tragedies surrounding Sol’s violent betrayals are echoed in the state of exception that continues to control Philippine politics and U.S. foreign relations, revealing the impetus behind Sol’s obsessive writing, and the reasons why this writing intensifies after she leaves the Philippines to make a new life in the United States.

Ka Popoy who organized labor movements after Marcos’s declaration of martial law and wrote a historical document known as the “PSR: The Semifeudal Alibi for Protracted War.”

²⁹ Sally, the only other female prominently featured in this group, later identifies herself to Sol as a fellow “Useless Fool” (292). It is not a coincidence, by the way, that Sally’s name appears to be an assimilated and Americanized version of the names Sol and Soli, and that at the end of the novel, Sally appears to be happily integrated into American life in a way that Sol is not.

Similar to other states of exception, measures meant to address temporary states of emergency instead initiate long-term corrupt colonial politics that continue beyond the country's independence, and continue to haunt Sol even after leaves her parents' home country.³⁰ In fact, Neferti Tadiar points out that even with Philippine decolonization and independence, reactionary social and governmental structures of power emerged that continue to have effects in the present. She writes, "Since the popular deposing of the dictatorial regime of Ferdinand Marcos in 1986, itself a permanent state of emergency built on the worsening economic, social, and political crisis from the late 1960s to the early 1980s, one crisis situation after another has obtained" (Tadiar 3). Tadiar goes on to describe what Giorgio Agamben might have called a state of exception built upon a state of exception, showing how supposedly short-term political measures meant solely to account for exceptional moments in history have instead become commonplace practice. The crises that sparked Marcos's regime, his initiation of martial law, paramilitary criminal actions, and various American interventions that Rick Bonus refers to as "civilizing missions" (32-3)—all mentioned in Sol's writings—are themselves prompted by crises related to Spanish colonization, the Philippine-American War, and the Balangiga Massacre, the latter of which eventually fuels the unspeakable distress that provokes Sol's breakdown in the United States. As Agamben notes, "the declaration of the state of exception has gradually been replaced by an unprecedented generalization of

³⁰ The circumstances that constitute a state of emergency depend on the nation and the circumstances, but most include the suspension of certain government functions and/or governmentally-approved rights, and can be prompted by governmental upheaval (as was done in the Philippines in 2006 under Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's presidency) or natural disaster (as the Philippines has done in the wake of disasters such as typhoons).

the paradigm of security as the normal technique of government” (14). In other words, the calamities that brought about these totalizing, oppressive forces have since fallen away, but the lasting governmental effects and practices brought on by these calamities are normalized in such a way that their continued presence is nearly invisible. Sol’s experiences with these oppressive institutions have become embodied in her psyche to the point where she does not need to be physically present in the Philippines to feel their effects. Her breakdown is further exacerbated by multiculturalism’s conditional acceptance of her cultural background that does not include American imperial actions or connections in the Philippines either in the past (with incidents like the Balangiga Massacre) or the present (including U.S. paramilitary involvement with the Marcos dictatorship). This state of exception further fuels the writing of her *talambuhay* which becomes not a tool for healing the present in the United States, but rather a transethnic mode of protest against multiculturalism’s privileging of a certain kind of rational subject, making the past more visible not by common modes of historiographic writing but instead matching Sol’s indirect writing sensibility.

Haunted by the twinned worlds of Manila and New York, Sol is herself suspended in a constant state of emergency, belonging neither to one country nor the other. Apostol places her wayward protagonist in post-9/11 New York City, but keeps Sol’s mind locked in the battles of the Balangiga Massacre and the student protests against paramilitary actions, showing how these juxtaposed moments of upheaval consign Sol to a state of exception associated not with a specific place or government, but within the body—with an embodied consciousness of her inability to belong. Amin Maalouf contemplates the

impossibility of claiming a neatly distinguishable identity when wrought with the memory of historical conflict. He asserts, “in the age of globalization and of the ever-accelerating interminglings of elements in which we are all caught up, a new concept of identity is needed, and needed urgently” (35). Like Sol, the Lebanese-born Parisian author Maalouf makes his home in the nation that colonized his country of birth. Maalouf notes that those like Sol and himself “live in a sort of frontier zone criss-crossed by ethnic, religious and other fault lines,” and “have a special role to play in forging links, [and] eliminating misunderstandings” (4-5). By being able to navigate these identities varying from colonized subject to cosmopolitan citizen, Maalouf assumes a power that Sol does not have; instead, she fashions her form of transethnic creative activism—that is, her writing—within her troubled body and mind.

Unlike Maalouf, Sol cannot claim definitive membership in her own minority culture, let alone declare herself a “true” American subject, thus suspending her in limbo between these two ontological frames. This suspension is illustrated by her inability to speak the Philippine native language, preventing her from connecting with her classmates, teachers, and, most significantly, to herself and her writing. That she is able to get by at all in a “foreign” country solely on her knowledge of English speaks to the power that the West, and especially the United States, has had over the cultural identity of the Philippines, an influence that John Carlos Rowe, Ulf Hannerz, and others call “coca-colonization” (Rowe 28; Hannerz 217). Nonetheless, America’s influence is not enough to make Sol feel embraced by her countrymen in the Philippines, inciting Sol’s transethnic response through obsessive composition and mental breakdown. Sol’s

linguistic limitations lead to her marginalization by classmates, servants, and teachers. At a funeral for revolutionaries shot by paramilitary groups trained by Colonel Grier and commanded by the Dictator, Sol relates how attendees spoke “in multiple, accusing tongues—the languages I had overheard all throughout childhood, and which I understood the way I understood the weather: a code beyond my need to comprehend, a sensory mist separate from me, a knowledge of myself I have never grasped” (128). Sol has the physiognomic traits expected of a native speaker, and yet is in many ways a foreigner. The exceptionality of her linguistic confusion in the Philippines manifests itself in New York in a confusion of language and identity. In the country where she is supposed to feel validated because of her command of the English language, she instead continues to feel like an outsider.

Like her life in the Philippines, Sol’s life in the United States is thus similarly marked by bewilderment and exclusion exacerbated by her preoccupation with the ways she has been appropriated into American life while simultaneously excluded from it. Dylan Rodriguez interprets Filipino American indifference toward U.S. politics as silent complicity in their own colonial and cultural appropriation (15); not unlike Griggers’ pursuit of the luxury of forgetting that begins first with remembrance, Rodriguez thus posits that the Filipino American subject seeks visibility with the ultimate goal of transparency—that is, the “rational, autonomous, and self-determining ‘I’ that the Filipino subject aspires to embody, but always cannot quite attain” (6). This impossible Filipino American subject is directly related to the dehumanized and emasculated historical image of Filipinos as America’s “little brown monkeys” or “little brown

brothers” (qtd. in Rodriguez 102), and to America’s rendering invisible of the more negative consequences of U.S.-Philippine relations.³¹ It is not surprising that an exceptional subject like Sol who refuses to stay indifferent or silent in the face of American imperialism would thus find comfort in uncertainty and obscurity.

In fact, this uncertainty echoes the linguistic “confusion” Sarita See tracks throughout history: The Philippines has been characterized as “unincorporated territory,” while the Filipino Americans themselves have been variably classified as noncitizen non-alien, or “foreign in a domestic sense” (See xii). Oscar Campomanes extends this in-betweenness to the assumption of multicultural subjects as willing United States immigrants, stating that we cannot count the migrations of early Filipinos into the country as immigration. Instead, “as the Chicano scholars would say. . . it was the borders that moved and not people alone” (40-1).³² Actually, for an extended portion of Philippine American history, “Filipinos moved to the continental states not as nationals of a sovereign nation but as *U.S. nationals* of a territory ‘appurtenant to’ but considered as ‘belonging to’ the United States” (Campomanes 41, emphasis his). The onomastic confusion surrounding Filipino American status and identity echoes the incomprehension Magellan faced when first meeting the Filipinos. Gianni and Sol both relate that, not

³¹ In his provocative summation of the introduction of ethnic studies into the academy, David Theo Goldberg invokes similar language, noting that the “knowledge of the universe, imagined in and by the unicultural university, began to rupture under its self-imposed constrictions because it was unable to accommodate. . . insights, vision, and demands of those whose subjectivities it had acknowledged only as barbarian. Unable to speak, let alone write, the barbarians uttered unrecognizable sounds. Eventually, those sounds came to be named multiculturalism” (11).

³² He adds, “I have always maintained the position that the term ‘Filipino American’ is a redundancy (and not just an apparent oxymoron): to be Filipino is already, whether you move to the United States or remain where you are, to be American. . . . For me, the term to privilege is ‘Filipino,’ for it is the truly plastic term with the capacity to authorize a whole series of valences, historically speaking (from Spanish colonial times to the diasporic moment of the present)” (42).

unlike Henry Hudson whose namesake river Sol's home overlooks and who had "sought China, but instead found Albany" (24), Magellan believed himself returned to Indonesia instead of in the Philippines (Apostol 101). Sol carries out this confusion of place, people, and language not only in the doubling of names and situations in her writing, but also in her transethnic attempt to revise the revisionist history of U.S. imperialist actions in the Philippines.

Sound as a Bell: Obscurity, Whitewashing, and the Balangiga Massacre

For Sol, a vital part of this revisionist history involves the Balangiga Massacre. Kimberly Alidio notes that American attempts to erase their retaliatory actions in Balangiga began almost immediately; she cites American schoolteacher Harry Cole who, less than a year after the conflict, writes from the Philippines asserting that U.S. stories about their actions in Balangiga were "fixed up and whitewashed" (qtd. in Alidio 113). Because of the subsequent inaccessibility of this information, the main access Sol appears to have to the massacre and the events that followed is Joseph L. Schott's *The Ordeal of Samar* (1964). Schott describes the Filipinos as "an ignorant and undisciplined mob, ranging in age from children to mature men, but armed with muskets, bolo knives and primitive bamboo cannon, [sic] they are dangerous foes on their own ground, the densely tangled jungle" (4). Most of Schott's mentions of the Samareños are as insurrectos, enemies, or bolomen, and, while a host of American characters are named, he mentions few Filipinos by name beyond General Emilio Aguinaldo, Balangiga Police Chief Pedro Sanchez—who Rolando Borrinaga notes is a fictional character (59), and two guides

supposedly named Slim and Smoke. Echoing Schott's characterizations, Sol writes "that our books of history were invariably in the voice of the colonist, the one who misrecognized us. We were inscrutable apes engaging in implausible insurrections against gun-wielding epic heroes who disdained our culture but wanted our land" (122). By paralleling Magellan's misrecognition of those whom he thought were the Indonesians and the Balangiga conflict that occurs a few years after the Spanish relinquished colonial control over the Philippines, Sol connects the Philippine-American incidents at Balangiga to the first Spaniard encounter with the Filipinos, the incipient moment of colonial contact.

Sol's first encounter with Colonel Arthur Grier is also the reader's first glimpse into her responses to the colonizer's voice and her rewriting of this revisionist history. Like revolutionary hero José Rizal, who in 1890 republished and annotated Spanish colonizer Antonio de Morga's *Sucesos de las Islas Filipinas* to rectify the imperialist assumptions of the text,³³ Sol reframes Grier's history of Filipino mutiny as "the tail end of our revolution, the Filipino-American War in 1899" (37). She counters that Filipinos were in the middle of fighting Spanish colonizers when Americans offered assistance in "the name of democracy—to free ourselves from tyrannical Spain. Instead, [the Americans] invaded. . . . Your army killed six hundred thousand Filipinos from 1899 to 1902, a war worse than Vietnam. That was no insurrection, Colonel. That was our war of independence" (38). Grier, who penned his thesis linking the Philippines and Vietnam

³³ Apostol's metafictional novel, *The Revolution According to Raymundo Mata* (2009), extends the concept of Rizal's annotation of *Sucesos* to its extreme postmodern conclusion with a work that piles up annotation upon annotation by its three female editors and translator.

before he himself was drafted into the Vietnam War (177), claims he writes solely from an apolitical, military standpoint. Nonetheless, his references to Asians and specifically Filipinos as “Charlie” (the Vietnam War term for the communist opposition), “cockroaches,” and even “Oriental freaks” belies Grier’s objectivity, further confirmed by his involvement in the paramilitary groups killing those who oppose the Dictator (Apostol 156, 154, 36). Though he had no direct stake in the U.S.-Philippine War, Grier gloats when he reminds Sol that, despite her attempts to revise the fight for independence, the outcome remains the same: The Filipinos lost. Sol nevertheless draws attention to multiple histories and perspectives, exposing the instability of historical narratives and the way these stories can symbolically erase whole populations from the past and present. Apostol shows how American colonial actions in Samar and other parts of the Philippines echo the imperialist actions of nations like Spain, the American intervention in Vietnam in the 1960s and 1970s, Philippine paramilitary actions from those like Grier, and even responses to the Middle East following 9/11.

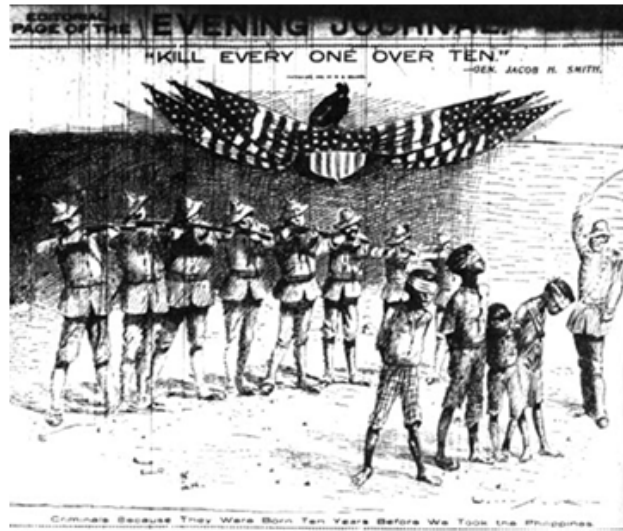


Figure 1. Homer C. Davenport's Political Cartoon from William Randolph Hearst's *New York Evening Journal* (May 5, 1902), Depicting U.S. Troops Executing Filipino Children.

In Sol's mind, the paramilitary-related deaths remind her of her research into the Balangiga conflict. In 1901, after the Filipino revolutionaries launched a surprise attack killing 48 men—which constituted nearly two-thirds of the American soldiers occupying Balangiga (Jones 235), General Jacob H. Smith led a counterattack. Even today, scholars contest the extent of American retaliatory measures and the Filipinos killed after the attack; Sharon Delmendo cites a Veterans of Foreign Wars statistic noting 250 mostly civilian Filipinos killed, five times that of American soldiers who died. However, this number is actually an underestimation according to others, some of whom list Filipino deaths in the tens of thousands (Delmendo 170-2, 209).³⁴ Despite the disagreements,

³⁴ For more on the conflict, see John Morgan Gates' *Schoolbooks and Krags*, Linn, and the US Army Military History Institute (USAMHI)'s bibliography. Texts published in the Philippines and/or by Philippine authors and historians about the Balangiga conflict are not as easily accessible in the United States, but some of these include Rolando O. Borrinaga's *The Balangiga Conflict Revisited*, Maia

many historians echo versions of the story relayed in Schott's *Ordeal of Samar*, in which Smith told Major Littleton Waller, "I want all persons killed who are capable of bearing arms in actual hostilities against the United States" (Schott 71; see Figure 1). When Waller asks for clarification, Smith indicates that all who are "ten years and older" should be killed, adding that the "interior of Samar must be made a howling wilderness" (Schott 72, 278). In what many historians identify as the most grisly event of the Philippine-American War, the military kills Philippine civilians, impresses survivors into labor, and destroys food supplies right before Samar's dry season. Having access to this history mainly "through the enemy's lens" (122), Sol cannot reconcile her own historical narrative with that of the colonizer. The "Balangiga Massacre" of her history books refers to the deaths of the 48 American soldiers, and not to the hundreds and even thousands of Filipino men, women, and children killed in the massacre's bloody aftermath.

While Apostol subsequently posits a parallel between American actions during the Balangiga conflict and the U.S. military's complicity in Philippine paramilitary efforts, Sol's own breakdown caused by discovering these connections obscures the clarity of these historical equivalents. In part because these events have become invisible over time, Sol cannot make the disturbing parallels between the lives lost in Balangiga and the people killed by the paramilitary groups, often with guns sold by her own parents. Sol's debilitating distress causes her to struggle to compose her thoughts on both events,

Trinidad's *Return to Balangiga*, and Reynaldo H. Imperial's article, "Spanish and American Colonization Processes in Samar." Borrinaga also wrote "100 Years of Balangiga Literature," a literary review describing Schott and other authors' writings on the event. Part of the Balangiga Research Group in the Philippines, Bob Couttie's *Hang the Dogs* remains one of the most comprehensive accounts of the massacre, though reviewers have questioned the text's accuracy. See, for example, Gates' 2005 review in *The Journal of Military History*.

attempting in her own troubled way to speak the unspeakable through her writing. Sol is able to assume an assured historian's perspectives about some aspects of the Philippine American War, but—even before her hermit-like asylum in New York—she cannot find words adequate enough to deal with recent crises in the Philippines like the “[f]ive young farmers and one child” shot by paramilitary forces while she and Soli were protesting alongside them in Monumento (126). Her description of these moments and their parallels to the Balangiga Massacre are thus hidden in ambiguity, a quality that Sol uses to her advantage in relaying her indistinct talambuhay to her readers. Stymied by the murkiness of America's imperialist history and caught in the throes of mental breakdown from which she refuses to emerge, Sol very well understands the power of obscurity. Her constant revisions, a transethnic practice she exercises even in the first page of the novel, might suggest an unreliability and vagueness further exacerbated by Sol's inability to cogently communicate the sources of her distress. While Soli suggests that “obscurantism. . . does not serve change” (123), Sol instead shows that those in power have actually relied on hiding the facts to maintain their control. Similarly, Apostol puts the onus on the reader to make these connections, to inspire action through active—or even activist—reading, and to interpret Sol's uncertainty and mental distress as a source of authority. These metafictional moves of underlining Sol's acts of revision and unreliability correlate to Sol's own indirectness: She connects the state of exception prompted by American colonization of the Philippines at the turn of the 20th century to the state of exception which allows the Philippine government to kill its own people during the Marcos dictatorship.

Sol's obscurity mimics multiculturalism's inability to accept contrary allegiances and modes of history; Sol cannot pursue visibility as a straightforward construct, and thus finds power and agency in darkness. This murkiness is literalized in the scene that sets off Sol's betrayal of her parents through the theft of their weapons. Sol cannot endure photos depicting the paramilitary's mutilations of a child's severed head, so a student leader Edwin, in an attempt to bring her back into the revolution after they so unceremoniously kicked her out, directs her instead to a shadow at the edge of the photograph. Pointing to the dark line, Edwin explains to Sol, "That's a gun: an automatic. Your parents sold it to the government [in] a long chain of trade. . . And that's the trade's trajectory: perfectly angled, toward that child" (194). The photo, and the shadow of her parents' involvement, prompts Sol to rejoin the revolution, ultimately leading to Jed's murder of Colonel Grier. Such a sentimental appeal proves especially effective with Sol, whose sheltered privilege and preoccupation with history deeply influence the subtext that the photograph provides. The child in the picture and the child killed by the paramilitary at the rally, both of the ages that Smith would have ordered killed in Balangiga, therefore haunt Sol even in New York.

Indicative of the obscurity that plagues Sol's own narrative, this haunting manifests itself most obviously in Sol's constant misnaming of the houseboy Pete. Sol initially believes Pete's name to be Inocentes, describing him as having been born "a week after my birthday, the winter solstice—Holy Innocents' Day—an orphan salvaged from a pile of castaways" (76). At the end of the novel, when Sol breaks her hermit-like state and momentarily leaves her New York home, Pete questions her readiness for such

a venture. Sol replies, “You are a dwarf, Inocentes: that is why the city scares you. I am not the same as you. My health has returned. I am well now, you know” (282-3). The chef Victoria Eremita laughs, again reminding Sol that Inocentes’ real name is Pete.³⁵ By forgetting this basic fact, Sol shows that, despite her confident claim, she is far from well. Her invocation of Inocentes and Holy Innocents’ Day actually reveals Sol’s continuing mental breakdown. Known also as the Massacre of the Innocents, Holy Innocents’ Day refers to biblical King Herod’s order for the deaths of all boys in Bethlehem under the age of two in defense of his throne from Jesus. While the gruesome story is potentially more myth than truth (Gelb 141-2), Sol ties the legend to the retaliatory slaughter of children that General Smith ordered after the Balangiga Massacre. In pairing the Massacre of the Innocents with Smith’s military retribution, Sol reframes the Balangiga Massacre to refer not only to the 48 Americans lives lost, but also to the hundreds and maybe thousands of Filipinos—many children—who died as a result of Smith’s ensuing reprisal. She thus takes the imperial story of American soldiers tamping down rebellious insurgents, and revises this history to include the Filipino lives lost in the Massacre’s aftermath. Sol further associates these events with the revolutionary group’s attack on

³⁵ The name Victoria Eremita is one that Sol most likely makes up in her rewriting, as it references both philosopher Søren Kierkegaard’s pen name for his work *Either/Or* (1843) as well as Sol’s own assumed pseudonym during the revolution. Latin for “the victorious hermit,” Sol’s pseudonym also foreshadows her hermit-like writer’s refuge in New York. Additionally, the alternative spelling, *Ermita*, is a district in Manila and the title of a novel by F. Sionil José, one of the Philippines’ most widely known authors. Apostol’s evocation of Kierkegaard as Victor Eremita is also deliberate, as *Either/Or* is concerned with ethical involvement: Does one involve oneself in the outside world, or remain unaware? This question has obvious resonance for Sol, who must reckon with her parents’ implication in Philippine paramilitary actions and her own involvement in the student uprisings leading to Colonel Grier’s death and the People Power Revolution to overthrow oppressive leaders and oppose government corruption in 1986. Incidentally, Kierkegaard’s question also forms the foundation of inquiry for subsequent chapter, which discusses the overlaps between passive witnessing and active involvement.

Grier by repeatedly pointing out that her theft of her parents' guns, used in the murder of Colonel Grier, was enacted on Holy Innocents' Day (Apostol 205). Sol's unwillingness to make explicit mention of these connections in her writing mimics America's imperial history which hides in multiculturalism's shadow, revealing her limitations in telling her own narrative.



Figure 2. Balangiga Bells as Originally Exhibited at Fort D.A. Russel (Now F. E. Warren Air Force Base).

In fact, Sol's inability to remain well—her transethnic refusal to move on and to write herself into the present—evokes a different mental condition, one that many Asian American scholars, including Campomanes and Kandice Chuh, associate with American history. If Sol suffers from an inability to deal with the present, then Apostol and these critics argue that the United States suffers from amnesia—an inability to reconcile with

the past. This American illness is most obvious in the controversy surrounding the Balangiga bells. Historians disagree on specific details, but the legend is that Balangiga priests sounded the bells to signal the Filipinos to attack the American soldiers. Two of the most likely tolled bells are now housed at Francis E. Warren Air Force Base in Cheyenne, Wyoming (see Figure 2). A commemoration of the American lives lost at the massacre, the bells are also seen—particularly by Americans and Filipinos who seek the bells’ return to Balangiga—as imperialist spoils of war. Despite governmental acts, compromises by Philippine presidents, and numerous letters and petitions from both countries to return one or both of the bells,³⁶ they remain in the United States. Alidio attributes America’s reluctance to our willful amnesia in the face of American imperialism, stating that “[s]everal enlisted and civilian Americans expressed in interviews the fear that the U.S. soldier (or the memory of U.S. bravery against the ‘insurrecto’) would be greatly diminished by the view that the battle of Balangiga was an incident of imperial conquest” (119). The refusal to give up, or even share, the bells thus signifies the United States’ own conscious revision of history that ignores U.S. colonization of the Philippines in favor of President William McKinley’s notion of “benevolent assimilation.” Wyoming veterans opposed House Resolution 312 of the 105th Congress in 1997, the closest the bells ever got to a Philippine return. According to Delmondo, retired Air Force Col. Joe Sestak characterized then-Philippine Ambassador Paul Rabe’s discussion on the issue as reactionary, stating that Rabe’s insistence that U.S.

³⁶ One of the proposed (and subsequently refused) compromises offered by the Philippine government in 1997 involved keeping one bell in each country and pairing each with a reproduction as a way of “symbolizing a shared history, both positive and negative” (Delmendo 180).

presence in the Philippines was for reasons other than benevolent assimilation made U.S. soldiers out to be “terrorists” (182).³⁷ The American government has subsequently refused to award Congressional Medals of Honor to those Americans who died in the massacre since, in doing so, the United States would have to contend more directly with the fact that war even took place in the Philippines in the first place (Delmondo 195). If her doctors, family, and friends deem Sol mentally ill, unfit to join multicultural America because of her obsession with writing about the past, then Delmondo and Apostol suggest that Americans’ refusal to recognize their own history is its own kind of sickness.

On November 7, 2013, the same site where the Balangiga Massacre took place was ravished by Typhoon Yolanda, (called Typhoon Haiyan by those outside of the Philippines). The doubling that pervades Sol’s narration is echoed here in the island of Leyte, which neighbors the coastal town of Balangiga and is hometown not only to Sol’s mom, but also to Soli and to the Lady herself, Imelda Marcos. Newspaper reports revealed that, in the wake of the thousands dead and dying, Marcos—a woman once widely known as the Iron Butterfly—was deliberately shielded from the extent of the devastation,³⁸ her aides telling the now infirm former First Lady that the television was broken and that there had been a notable but very minor storm in her hometown. Marcos’s aides, mimicking multicultural celebrations of diversity that cover over American imperial actions, have hidden the truth about the extent of the damage. Not

³⁷ In 2012, almost a decade after Delmondo’s book was published, Wyoming’s *Star-Tribune* reporter Kerry Drake followed up with this same Joe Sestak, the most vocal of the Wyoming veteran representatives at the time. Sestak now stated that after having spoken with a daughter of one of the Americans killed at the massacre and having conducted more research on the issue, he has since revised his beliefs and feels the bells “belong in Balangiga, in the church belfry.”

³⁸ See, for example, the article entitled “Imelda Marcos shielded from Leyte typhoon damage.”

unlike multicultural history's whitewashing of U.S. imperial actions in Balangiga and elsewhere, and the façade of a peaceful world that Imelda and Ferdinand Marcos attempted to orchestrate during their dictatorship,³⁹ the Iron Butterfly's aides have fashioned an alternative universe where Yolanda's waters barely rose and where thousands of people have not died. On November 21, 2013, Nathan Layne of Reuters cited a chief aide to the mayor of Balangiga, Marciano Deladia, who said that he appreciates the food and assistance that the U.S. has provided in the wake of the storm and the thousands who have died. However, while the surviving Balangiga residents "don't have any animosity against the American people," what he would really like to have are the church bells returned to his people. Whether this happens will depend in large part on America's willingness to reckon with its imperial past. Until then, Balangiga will remain as Sol describes it, as "the town for whom the bells do not toll" (122).

Releasing a Double into the World: *Shadow Tag*'s Productive Destruction

There's beauty in the breakdown.
--Imogen Heap & Guy Sigsworth, "Let Go" (2002)

Irene America, the protagonist of Erdrich's *Shadow Tag*, shares Sol's tendency toward subversive storytelling and, like Sol, manifests a kind of creative activism through her writing, recording her mental breakdown in her diary while at the same time writing

³⁹ This construction of reality is extensively illustrated in Filipino American novelist Eric Gamalinda's metafictional text, *The Empire of Memory* (1992).

in defiance of the seemingly reasonable suggestions given to her by her marriage counselor, her half sister, and other family members to write more “productively” or “correctly.” In fact, when Irene begins to suspect that her husband—the famous white-Native American painter Gil—is secretly reading the red notebook she hides in her office, Irene begins to also keep a clandestine blue notebook housed in a safety deposit box at the local bank. She continues to maintain her red diary to attempt to temper Gil’s abusive behavior toward her, their sons Florian and Stoney, and their daughter Riel, though at times this writing has the opposite effect, inciting Gil’s rage and volatility. Irene, also emotionally damaged by their tempestuous marriage, occasionally appears to willfully encourage Gil’s destructiveness: In addition to not confronting Gil directly about his reading her red diary, Irene also willingly poses for his paintings. For the duration of their relationship, Gil has actually only painted Irene, the portraits suggesting “problems of exploitation, the indigenous body, the devouring momentum of history” (11). Gil replicates Irene in countless paintings, showing her “on all fours, looking beaten once, another time snarling like a dog and bleeding, menstruating. In other paintings she was a goddess, breasts tipped with golden fire. Or a creature from the Eden of this continent, covered with moss and leaves. . . . she appeared raped, dismembered, dying of smallpox in graphic medical detail” (30). Through the use of Irene’s image and body, Gil’s mode of art confronts the subjugation inflicted upon indigenous people, combating the notion of the vanishing Indian by forcing viewers to contend with the provoking, lifelike image of his wife. Paula Gunn Allen writes, “One of the major issues facing twenty-first-century Native Americans is how we, multicultural by definition—either as

Native American or American Indian—will retain our ‘Indianness’ while participating in global society. . . . That we do not fit easily into pre-existing officially recognized categories is the correlative of our culture of origin” (*Off* 6). Multicultural celebrations of the Indian as the honorable, primeval American ancestor inspire both Gil’s art and Irene’s response to his art. While Irene identifies with Gil’s message, she realizes that, since their encounter, her husband employs only one primary mode of artistic response to native oppression, and that is to recreate Irene’s image—no matter how vulgar or shocking—with the goal of reaching white audiences.

Gil’s paintings of his wife often disturb her, Irene noting “such cruel portrayals that her eyes smarted and her cheeks burned as if she’d been slapped” (31). Nonetheless, Irene often sympathizes with Gil’s intent. After all, his focus primarily on the female form, embodied in Irene, recalls Laguna Métis author Allen’s call for a “shift from warrior/brave/hunter/chief to grandmother/mother/Peacemaker/farmer. . . . However he is viewed,” Allen continues, “sympathetically or with suspicion and terror—the Indian is always *he*” (*Sacred* 265, 263). Gil’s obsession with Irene’s image therefore represents a relatively reasonable response to U.S. domination of indigenous peoples. In effect, his reaction is not unlike the impulse of early postcolonial criticism, which focused on—as Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin describe it—“writing back” to those in power. In its understandable but gritty execution, Gil’s response further resembles Richard Wright’s belief that African Americans should situate their art primarily as protests against racist oppression stemming from dominant white society. Ironically, though, Gil’s images of Irene also reify colonial notions of indigenous women as either

virtuous goddesses or dangerous squaws. The proliferation of these binary images creates a new type of vanishing Indian, presenting someone like Irene—a complicated indigenous woman living in the present—as obsolete.

This binary portrayal of indigenous women evokes 19th-century American depictions of (primarily white) women as either angels or monsters. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar describe author Virginia Woolf's reaction to this binary, detailing her declaration that women writers must "kill. . . the angel in the house." They go on to say that these writers must in turn "kill the angel's necessary opposite and double, the 'monster' in the house, whose Medusa-like face also kills female creativity" (17). According to Gilbert and Gubar, the appropriate reaction to these reductive double stereotypes is outright destruction—a "killing" that leaves no trace of either type. This advice seems to defy the seemingly even-keeled judgment like that promoted by Sol's doctors or by Gil and Irene's friends and marriage counselor. Actually, not unlike Gilbert and Gubar's conception of the male poet who would enclose the female writer "in definitions of her person and her potential which, by reducing her to extreme stereotypes (angel, monster) drastically conflict with her own sense of self. . . and her own identity as a writer" (48), Gil entraps Irene in severe, indigenous doubles of the angelic, primordial earth goddess or the exotic, monstrous temptress. Whether working on a canvas or interacting in his own home, Gil appears unable to see how his depictions of Irene bring about the same kinds of limitations that he attempts to contest. Notably, the doubles in both Apostol and Erdrich's novels are far more complex in their differences, thus warranting more nuanced responses.

Erdrich's novel is actually replete with complicated aspects of doubling, seen most obviously in Irene's representations in Gil's art. Irene realizes that, "By remaining still, in one position or another, for her husband, she had released a double into the world. It was impossible, now, to withdraw that reflection. Gil owned it. He had stepped on her shadow" (39). Irene realizes the intricacy in "killing" an image that is partially her own. Like Sol, who Jed sometimes refers to as Solipsism, Gil is reprimanded by Irene for his self-absorption. Irene thinks Gil is in love with himself and the image of her he has created. Juxtaposing a violent scene from the film *Rashomon* to her own willingness to pose for Gil, Irene admits, "I was no victim, of course; I was passive. I was vain. But then he fell on the mirror and made love to his own image every night. . . the image he had created of a woman desired by other men" (184). Irene realizes that the symmetry that constituted the earlier part of their marriage no longer exists (183-4), and that through his paintings of her, Gil has since only created images of himself and his emotional experiences of postcolonial multiculturalism. This realization prompts her transethnic response in her writings; Irene's two notebooks—particularly the blue notebook hidden in the shadows—are her desperate attempt to recover a part of herself that was lost to her marriage and Gil's paintings, and are "a matter," she admits, "of life and death" (47). Gil's failure to see Irene as she is today has resulted simultaneously in the loss of her double—her husband—as well as herself.

Gil's paintings challenge Irene's view of herself in the larger framework of the nation. Irene finds it difficult to, as Gilbert and Gubar describe it, "kill the aesthetic ideal through which [women] themselves have been 'killed' into art" (17) by opposing Gil's

violence and his painting. The struggle she faces in doing so manifests itself in her experience as a battered wife attempting to fend for her children's safety, but also in being a post/colonial subject of the only country that she calls home, a state that results in a splintered self—a doubling forced upon the hybrid subject.⁴⁰ While limiting in its scope, Gil's artistic response to the vanishing Indian stereotype embodies what Irene recognizes as his own messy but loving attempts to protect his home and his homeland. Inés Hernández-Ávila reminds us that, for indigenous people, any idea of home “within the domestic sphere was largely and intentionally disrupted by the colonialist process. Considering how we were seen literally as the enemy by colonial and then (in the United States) federal forces, Native people were and have been forced historically to address the issue of ‘home’ in the ‘public sphere’” (492). In this way, *Shadow Tag* evokes the ultimate double: Gil and Irene's fractured household—embodied in Gil's world-renowned paintings of Irene, but also in Irene's alcoholism and Gil's physical and emotional abuse—replicates a sickness in the nervous system, or the nation at large. As Jana Sequoya Magdaleno points out, “The possibilities inherent in tribal sovereignty are complicated by the paradox that the United States both suffers the tribes as testimony to its largess and exploits them as internally constituted outside” (279). Gil and Irene's home and homeland are both broken and splintered. The dual relationship of indigenous peoples to the United States as honored ancestor and what Magdaleno calls “obstacle” or

⁴⁰ Homi Bhabha describes hybridity as a “problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist disavowal, so that other ‘denied’ knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority - its rules of recognition” (162). In other words, the conventional definition of classical multiculturalism does not apply here; hybridity is not simply a commingling of certain aspects of two different cultures, but a relationality of dynamic power. While hybridity is a state wrought from colonialism, Irene and Gil's exclusion from postcolonial multiculturalism points to the need for a transethnic approach to extend hybridity's influence.

“residue” (281) thus manifests itself as mental distress in Gil’s paintings as well as in Irene’s dual writing in her notebooks.

This splintering also emerges in the stormy turbulence of Gil and Irene’s marriage. Erdrich’s novel describes vacillating moments of surfacing and sinking; every interaction between the two is psychologically weighted with changeability. Even their attempts to “fix” their marriage in conventional ways seem compounded by Gil and Irene’s postcolonial status as outsiders, by their inability to fit common molds of normality. At one point, they laugh at one of their many failed attempts to see a marriage counselor, Gil proclaiming, “We’re too sick for her” (158). One could construe Gil’s dismissal as giving up but, as Allen writes, “Native Americans of the Five Hundred Nations never have fit the descriptions other Americans imposed. . . neither does our thought fit the categories that have been devised to organize Western intellectual enterprise” (*Off* 6). The therapist misunderstands Gil and Irene’s inventive ways of communication and thinking, accusing them of “dithering around [and] not addressing any pertinent issues” (151).⁴¹ Irene later even begins to question the sanity of the deliberately goading fiction of her red diary, more than once wondering if she should rip out the pages before Gil can read them. The reason Irene changes her mind and leaves the pages untouched, despite her accurate belief that her sensationalized writing will incite

⁴¹ Drawing attention to the blind spots of trauma therapy as they relate to imperialism, racism, and other systemic problems, Stef Craps highlights the deficiencies of Criterion A, a classification for what constitutes and causes trauma, noting that “many feminist and multicultural clinicians and researchers have argued that even in its current formulation Criterion A, though broad, is still narrow enough to make some important sources of trauma invisible and unknowable” (25). Whereas I am suggesting that multiculturalism as we know it has no place for subjects who have experienced trauma related to postcolonialism and imperialism, Craps argues that trauma theory itself fails to register the experience of non-western subjects as traumatic.

Gil's rage, recalls the impetus behind Gilbert and Gubar's violent description of the approach to images of feminine duality. Irene, in counsel with her sister May,⁴² realizes that "she couldn't say it, but she knew [by provoking Gil to rage and hopefully being given an out to end her marriage] she was destroying a world. A little culture. It was the known and safe way of behaving in the family" (168). With this realization, Irene begins to destroy her marriage both *through* her writing in her journal, and *in* writing in a legal sense. Irene realizes that inciting Gil's breakdown and the subsequent failure of her marriage also means demolishing a world which has on its façade only the semblance of normalcy. However, she also recognizes that this destruction is the only way to save herself and her children—and maybe even Gil, too.

Unsurprisingly, Irene begins the process of healing herself and her children, not by traditional methods of uniting the broken parts of her identity, but instead by splintering them even further. Her more productive and fracturing transethnic writing emerges in her creation of "another Irene, someone stronger and saner." This woman, who Irene refers to as Nurse, represents a willful rupture, a healing mechanism to which her therapist may have balked. Finally sober and divorced, with full responsibility for her three children, Irene notes that "Nurse Irene came in and took over with efficiency and

⁴² While there is no room to discuss this in this section, the doubling of Irene and May preview the incited return of the biographical author discussed in Chapter 4. Irene feels a rare moment of healing when May reveals that they share the same father and, instead of being her half-sister, tells Irene that she will instead "be [her] whole sister. That's the Indian way" (71). Irene's various overlaps with aspects of Louise Erdrich's biography—including, most prominently, the artist husband (Michael Dorris was a novelist and her writing partner) and his tragic suicide—are deflected by the fact that early review copies of Erdrich's novel named Irene's sister not May, but Louise. A skeleton of the change from Louise to May remains in the publication release, with one remnant "typo" identifying May as "Louise" (134). Erdrich's decision to change Louise to May implies several possible outcomes, including the possibility that Erdrich is challenging the reader to question the value of conventional forms of biographical reading in ethnic American metafictional texts.

calm and left the real Irene whimpering beneath the covers” (233). Composing now with a presumably renewed honesty in her red diary, Irene realizes that the harmful lies she had penned in its earlier pages were “only inevitable. Something had to happen. One of us go crazy. And as you can see from this entry, I may be cracking too” (237). Irene’s unsettled state actually unearths the first real moment of marital understanding she displays in her writing since Gil attempted suicide in response to her injunction for divorce. Still continuing to address Gil in her diary, she recalls “how you loved us. Like crazy. In a mean way. But love is love” (237). This realization allows Gil and Irene’s eventual reconciliation, though—like everything else in Erdrich’s disturbing novel—this, too, has its price. If Gil and Irene were “too sick” for their marriage counselor or for a life of normalcy, Erdrich suggests that they were also too passionate and senseless for this world in general. Like Sol, Gil and Irene find no place for them in their supposed home. However, Gil and Irene’s tragic death at the end of the novel reveals the third voice of the text—their daughter Riel, whose own transethnic writings constitute the novel as whole.

Changing is not Vanishing: “Rescuing” the Disappearing Indian



Figure 3. One Wall of The George Catlin Gallery in the Smithsonian Art Museum's Renwick Gallery.

Beyond Gil's oppression and abuse, Erdrich obscures the impulse behind Irene's transethnic resistance to both Gil and his message. Irene's ambiguous responses to Gil and his art stem from the violence associated with the historical narrative of the disappearing Indian. Irene, attempting to complete her doctoral thesis on the artist George Catlin, actually gains extensive historical knowledge about the disappearing Indian narrative through her research. Catlin, a 19th-century American painter who became famous for his Old West portraits of the Mandan and other indigenous tribes, became caught up in the aesthetic beauty and noble appearance of the Indians he encounters in the mid-1820s (see Figure 3). Biographer John Hausdoerffer relates that Catlin

strategically chose his subject in order to set himself apart from the Philadelphia art world, shifting his focus “from portraying men of power to memorializing what he deemed to be an idea of ‘Nature’ embodied in the ‘vanishing’ persons and landscapes of American Indians” (21). Whether Hausdoerffer intended so or not, the juxtaposition of powerful men and disappearing Indians suggests that the two are mutually exclusive. Catlin extends this power to himself, stating in 1861 that his endeavors focused on “rescuing from oblivion the looks and customs of the vanishing races of native man in America, to which I plainly saw they were hastening before the approach and certain progress of civilization” (qtd. in Youmans 339). Apparently excluded from power and doomed to oblivion, the indigenous American is “rescued” by Catlin’s romanticized Indians of the Old West while simultaneously destined for a never-ending departure. Rather than confronting the “nervous system” that subjugates and relocates Indians in the name of manifest destiny, Catlin instead sought to uphold this system by painting Indians as revered representations of the fading natural world. In other words, Catlin captures Native American cultures while reifying their disappearance. Whereas Gil’s images of Irene show Native American women as goddesses and innocents, the Indian of Catlin’s paintings is a noble savage, a perpetual anachronism. Irene’s research into Catlin’s artwork and her personal experience as the subject of Gil’s paintings reveal the potential drawbacks of postcolonial multiculturalism’s push for the visibility of ethnic groups and its protection of only certain “authentic” cultural elements. Specifically as it relates to Catlin, the wrong kind of visibility circumscribes Native American ethnicity as a relic of the past, a type of “endangered species” more valuable as an icon of a bygone era rather

than as the person next door or right in front of you. Catlin perpetuates a primitive indigeneity, replicating what Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc Wacquant call a “US folk-concept of ‘race’” (48) by enacting a form of cultural imperialism through his art. Describing visibility as it exists in Asian America, David L. Eng points out that “invisibility and visibility work in tandem to configure and reconfigure the Asian immigrant as the phantasmatic screen on which the nation projects its shifting anxieties of coherence and stability” (110). While there are certainly differences in the way the issue of visibility affects different ethnic groups,⁴³ Catlin’s representations are similarly indicative of apprehensions in his professional life and historical milieu—a time of Indian removal, westward expansion, and the rise of the industrial age. Gil’s paintings likewise protest the invisibility of imperial violence against indigenous persons, though they do so at the expense of Irene’s liberty as a Native American female and against her own personal expression of native politics.

⁴³ In fact, Eng’s project draws attention to differences on an even deeper level, focusing on visibility and agency specifically in relation to the Asian American masculinity. He suggests that these issues differ with Asian American females. Eng also points out the differences in masculinity across different Asian American ethnic groups. Not only gender plays a role in the discussion of visibility, as critics like Laura Gómez and Lázaro Lima highlight the role of historical contexts in issues of visibility whereby Chicano Americans are seen, for example, as ever-present.



Figure 4. From Catlin's *Letters and Notes on the Manners, Customs, and Condition of the North American Indians, Vol. 1*. This plate (between pages 92 and 93) is a sketch of Catlin's painting, Mi-néek-ee-súnk-te-ka, Mink, a Beautiful Girl

In an authorial move Sol would undoubtedly appreciate, Irene responds to Gil's intrusiveness by revising a story about Catlin and a Mandan girl known as The Mink to illustrate the connection between Gil and Catlin's thefts of indigenous images and the body (see Figure 4).⁴⁴ The verisimilitude and heart behind Catlin's painting of The Mink lead the Mandan to believe that the artist had stolen her soul. In Irene's version of the story, Catlin refuses to return the painting to the Mandan, and The Mink dies. Gil's discovery that Irene had altered the ending of the story (Catlin had actually returned the

⁴⁴ Irene's story refers to Catlin's painting, "Mi-néek-ee-súnk-te-ka, Mink, a Beautiful Girl" (1832), which is currently under the care of the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

portrait) makes Gil wonder if Irene was accusing him of “stealing something from her by painting her. . . that he was weakening or diminishing the ‘real’ Irene” (46). Gil’s realization does not persuade him to stop painting her or invading her privacy. Indeed, Irene likens Gil’s exploitation of her body and image to his reading of her red diary. While not directly confronting Gil about either abuse, Irene relates, “When you take away [a] person’s privacy you can control that person” (34). Gil neither endorses nor rebuffs Irene’s observation, though he later feels that the main appeal behind Irene’s posing for Gil’s portraits is that “she was there in front of him and he didn’t have to wonder what she was doing” (36). Gil thus reenacts the control that Irene likens in her writing to a theft of one’s soul. Rather than engaging directly in his marriage, family, or subject matter, Gil paints to keep all of these at a controllable remove. Irene’s sister May remarks on this aspect when she notes that Irene “found a guy who’d keep his distance by painting [her] naked” (69). Gil nearly admits as much when he wonders if he deliberately sabotages their marriage with Irene to “feel her absence, and in turn feel an aching desire out of which he could make his art” (81). In much the same way that Catlin, regardless of his intentions, benefits from depicting Indians to reify and combat their disappearance, Gil’s attempt to satiate his “aching desire” by connecting with the woman in front of him would remove the illusions Gil requires for his art. Irene responds accordingly, finding power in “feigned indifference” and in her revision of stories like that of *The Mink* (21, 44). Gil senses that she deliberately obscures her historical sources, not wanting him to confirm whether her stories are true (21). In her writing and revisions, Irene thus attempts

to tell Gil that no matter how many hundreds of times Gil paints her, he can never truly know or control her.

Gil never presents Irene as mundane or commonplace; rather, “he had used her humiliation as something larger—as *the iconic suffering of a people*, one critic had said” (37). Gil himself recognizes the limitations of his subject, a fellow artist telling him that he was doomed to be a Native American artist, rather than simply an American one. Gil characteristically displaces his responsibility in perpetuating these images, stating that he “couldn’t help” the fact that Irene’s “blood ancestors came out in Gil’s paint as he worked” (37). He models his authorship as one of unearthing a fossil of a preexisting story, rather than creating a new one. He paints Irene in the guise of indigenous sorrow because, after all, he seems to ask, what else is there? In confronting both Gil and Catlin’s work, Irene is thus faced with questions of control and knowability related to the postcolonial gaze. This concept, discussed extensively by Edward Said in *Orientalism*, relates seeing and knowing to the idea of possession. By seeing the indigenous other, viewers of Gil and Catlin’s paintings (not to mention, the painters themselves) can thus purport to know, and subsequently own and control, this other.

Irene’s secret journal writing stands as a testament to how little Gil actually knows her. Against the advice of her marriage counselor, Florian’s teacher, and the rest of the world outside their home, Irene incites marital strife and goads Gil’s already erratic temper, realizing that in the breakdown of her marriage lies salvation for her and her family. Irene’s ability to deceive Gil with her outrageously fictional—and to her account, “awful” (177)—accounts of infidelity in the red diary further speaks to Irene’s ultimate

unknowability, her transethnic, self-reflexive writing and storytelling thus acting as a way to wrest control of herself from Gil and his art. In his painting, Gil seeks a romanticized, dignified depiction of Indians in the same way he seeks idealized visions of his early passion with Irene (94). Whereas Apostol's protagonist Sol is caught in the past and its ability to control her emotional well-being in the present, Gil hides in his historicized paintings to deny the present. Gil refuses an honest assessment of his marriage without a canvas between them to control his perceptions. He knows that doing so would require accepting that he and Irene are emotionally damaged, both by their neglect for each other and by the nervous system that dismisses them as vanishing. Thus, whereas Irene attempts to incite breakdown in order to unveil the information necessary to make Gil aware of his abuse, Gil tenaciously holds on to an image of positive connection in his family life, unable to see the present as potentially restorative. He holds doggedly to the past as a means of enacting what he feels is necessary for his own survival, trying to avoid the disappearance that apparently dooms all indigenous people. As states the title of Robert Dale Parker's collection of Indian poetry, "Changing Is Not Vanishing." Gil is so traumatized by his changed place in life to the point of not realizing this, despite Irene's albeit unconventional attempts to communicate this to him.

Given their differences, the juxtaposition of Erdrich and Apostol's novels may seem unusual. After all, whereas Sol seeks to unearth the past of Philippine-American interactions, Irene fights for Gil to focus on the present. However, this difference between Sol's preoccupation with the past and Irene's spotlighting of the present is key to understanding the unrepresentable as it relates to the postcolonial female subject. Writing

secretively in her blue notebook, Irene addresses Gil, even though she knows he will never read these words. She pleads with him to not place so much emphasis on a single definitive occurrence, to resist the attractiveness of such a moment to reveal a hidden truth or a life-changing self-realization. She asks, “How many times have I described my own struggles in telling stories, relating historical occurrences, searching for the sequence of event that results in a pattern we can recognize as history? There are many moments, there is never just one” (48). Unsurprisingly, Gil’s response in a later conversation involves a discussion of art. The most revealing paintings, he insists, are the ones that capture a moment. Irene’s retort highlights a wholeness that, for those living in the country that colonizes them, is unattainable. “The greatest paintings,” Irene maintains, “are never just *one* moment. Look at Rembrandt’s late self-portraits. . . every moment he ever lived is in his eyes and on his face” (148). Like Sol, Irene seeks a perspective that accounts for multiple aspects of identity, not just the past or the present. For Sol, that means starting with the acknowledgment that the Philippines had a history with the United States in the first place. And for Irene, that means moving beyond the vanishing Indian to concede that Native Americans are still here.

As these two protagonists illustrate, postcolonial multiculturalism’s preoccupation should not ultimately concern visibility or invisibility, but what is done with the image and the narrative. Rather than simply protesting injustice, Sol and Irene draw attention to ways of creating new historical perspectives. While Catlin and Gil’s artistic intentions are ostensibly laudable, their miscalculations lie in the belief that combating specific images of the disappearing native is enough. As Magdaleno affirms, “The problem, of course, is

that the material conditions of being Indian have changed over time, while the images of Indianness have not” (282). Irene instead seeks to understand the vanishing Indian as just one aspect encompassing multiple narratives of numerous indigenous tribes throughout history. Despite her initial bouts with alcoholism and willful self-destruction, Irene does impart this much to her daughter Riel, who enacts the ultimate act of transethnic authorship, one that attempts—through collaboration, vulnerability, and interconnection—to piece together as complete a picture as she can of her family while responding to limited depictions of indigenous people. Directly addressing the reader at the close of the novel, Riel reveals that she is “the third person in the writing. . . . I have put it all together, both of her diaries. The Red Diary. The Blue Notebook. Her notes on Catlin. My memory charts” in addition to other notes, interviews with May and her parents’ marital counselor, and her own imaginings. Riel, reminiscing on her unforeseen role as author and collaborator with her parents, admits, “I am angriest at you, Mom, but there is this: you trusted me with the narrative” (251). Erdrich’s focus upon Riel in the face of supposed indigenous disappearance is not accidental; as Magdaleno notes, “Since many American Indian communities and traditions have been shattered, the young must reinvent viable conditions of being Indian” (Magdaleno 287). Riel does just this, configuring herself as “a contemporary Indian. A mixture of old and new” (119). From her parents, and then from her adoptive mother May, Riel learns that “the old-time Indians are us, still going to sundances, ceremonies, talking in the old language and even using the old skills if we feel like it, not making a big deal” (248-9). Beyond Catlin’s romanticized images of vanishing Indians, Gil’s dualistic portraits of Irene, and even

Irene's deliberately fractured modes of writing and interaction, Riel's transethnic method of collaborative writing—which draws attention to multiculturalism's limiting frameworks of self-identification—seeks, not wholeness, but a bittersweet and variable stability and an imperfect sense of belonging unfortunately lost to people like Sol, Irene, and Gil.

Given the violent and dramatic ways Gil and Irene attempted to respond to each other and the limitations of multiculturalist ideology, it is not surprising that Sarah Vowell likens her own relationship with the United States an abusive but alluring marriage. On a trip tracing the original path of the Trail of Tears—an event concurrent with Catlin's painting of vanishing Indians, Vowell recalls following the route where thousands of members of several indigenous nations, including her Cherokee ancestors, died while being forcibly relocated in the 1830s. Listening to a Chuck Berry song while driving, Vowell muses,

I feel a righteous anger and bitterness about every historical fact of what the American nation did to the Cherokee. But, at the same time, I'm an entirely American creature. I'm in love with this song and the country that gave birth to it. . . it's a good country, it's a bad country. . . And, of course, it's both. When I think about my relationship with America, I feel like a battered wife. Yeah, he knocks me around a lot, but boy, he sure can dance. (152)

Part of what multicultural tenets are often unwilling to acknowledge in terms of Americanness is this very conflict of inclusion, visibility, and belonging. Erdrich and Apostol challenge these tenets, not to destroy them completely, but to strengthen them, in the hopes that people like themselves would not be similarly plagued by what Maalouf

calls “a multiplicity of allegiances” (160). These protagonists illustrate the need, not for monumental displays of wholeness, but for a true acceptance of numerous sites of affiliation.

CHAPTER III

AGAINST “AUTHENTICITY”: COLLABORATION, AUTHORITY, AND
WITNESSING IN JUNOT DÍAZ’S *THE BRIEF WONDROUS LIFE OF OSCAR WAO*
AND JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER’S *EVERYTHING IS ILLUMINATED*

The narrator in Caribbean author Édouard Glissant’s prose fiction *La Lézarde* (*The Ripening*, 1958) speaks to some of the challenges and responsibility that come with both observing and participating in an event. “Yes,” Glissant’s narrator notes, “I am two people, a sensation frozen in time. I still hear echoes of the last celebration, I still hear the wild rejoicing of bygone days. They all call out to me. ‘Don’t forget, don’t forget. Remember us.’ As if words could be a river flowing down, which finally spreads out and overflows” (180). The narrator, whose role and perspective in Glissant’s text is intricately perplexing,⁴⁵ contends with what translator J. Michael Dash describes as the “difficulty of being both a witness and a recorder, the incompatibility of omniscience and direct experience, objectivity and subjectivity” (63). The narrator’s position is continually confused: He becomes incapable of remaining a mere bystander, but instead finds himself affected by, and in turn having an effect on, the situations and characters he describes. As Dash observes, “the ‘I’ of *La Lézarde* is often in danger of becoming a ‘we’ or a ‘you’” (64). In *La Lézarde*’s formation, then, the act of writing involves recording history while simultaneously being pulled into that history, resulting in a conflicted state that

⁴⁵ For more on Glissant’s narrator, see Elinor S. Miller.

challenges the authenticity of historical narratives and the authority invested in that narrative. In other words, to write is to witness, and to witness is to be involved in, and even responsible for, the actions one is witnessing.

However, the implications of this intricate role of writer and witness can complicate our understanding of authorship: Can a writer consider him- or herself authorized enough to tell an “authentic”—or pure, complete, and unadulterated—story from which he or she is not fully or objectively removed? Rather than suggesting that such involvement is a flaw of witnessing and recording history—or, as Dash describes it, a “danger” (64), Glissant complicates and even embraces the duality involved in being both a removed witness and an involved participant, finding in authorship a way to blur the binary in productive ways. The protagonists in Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and Jonathan Safran Foer’s *Everything is Illuminated* find themselves similarly caught up in the indistinct divides between bystander and partaker, drawing attention to their roles as both witnesses and recorders of the events taking place in their narratives. These characters—Jonathan and Alex in Foer’s novel, and Yunior and Oscar in Díaz’s text—are writers whose roles as witnesses do not absolve them of participating in the story, but rather implicate them in the texts’ events in ways that they had never intended, even giving them power over events that occur in the narratives and the way the narratives are told. For these protagonists, their inadvertent involvement and interconnection with others lead to questions of responsibility and power. In cases where they had meant to be disinterested writers and observers—or, at the least, removed from the scene by distance or time, they find that these very acts of authorship lead to life-

changing relationships and an increased sense of responsibility in the very events that transpire as a result of these connections. In this way, ethnic American literature's preoccupation with writing, specifically with the border-crossing genre of metafiction, appears inevitable given the troubled history many ethnic groups have had in relation to the exercising of authority, responsibility, and power—issues that are also at the forefront of authorship.

With the birth of writing and self-expression come tensions related to the authority inherent in the act of writing. Throughout this project, the fictional author-protagonists (as well as their real-life counterparts) are constantly grappling with questions of how much power is too much: How can one claim responsibility for witnessing the plights of others while not overexerting one's authority or overemphasizing limiting notions of accuracy and authenticity? Where does the balance between authorship and authority lie? And finally, how does one strike this balance in responsible witnessing and the telling of another's story? In Erdrich's *Shadow Tag*, the character Riel's collaborative creativity represents her attempt to achieve this balance. In addition to Irene's Catlin notes and her red and blue diaries, Riel also adds her memory charts chronicling her own accounts of her family's events, and consults other people including Gil and Irene's therapist and Irene's sister May. Most notably, she admits that "other times, I imagined that I was my mother. Or my father. . . So you see, I am the third person in the writing. I am the one with the gift of omniscience, which is something—I don't know if it's generally known—that children develop once they lose their parents" (Erdrich 251). Riel finds the power lost to her in her distressing childhood not through a

dogmatic pursuit of “authentic” Indianness, but instead through her collaborative and creative style of writing, combined with the moments she witnessed and experienced throughout her childhood.

In an article for *The Atlantic*, Theodore R. Johnson laments multiculturalism’s intolerance for the kind of history and storytelling that Riel embraces. Describing the heroes often mentioned in the commemorations of diversity that characterize Black History Month, Johnson observes,

We remember these champions and the bouts they fought, but they’re presented as extraordinary human beings—legends whose anomalous stories don’t neatly translate to everyday interracial encounters. As I move around the country, the behavior that greets me is usually more influenced by the black faces that fill crime-ridden local newscasts than the exceptionality of Charles Drew, James Baldwin, or Thurgood Marshall. The great black women and men who populate Black History Month celebrations feel like characters in a novel—a world away from the black guy a few steps behind you in a barren parking garage.

Multicultural events such as Black History Month⁴⁶ originally intended to respond to what Ronald Takaki calls the “Master Narrative of American History.” As Takaki explains, this narrative’s “narrow definition of who is an American reflects and reinforces a more general thinking that can be found in the curriculum, news and entertainment media, business practices, and public policies. Through this filter, interpretations of ourselves and the world have been constructed, leaving many of us feeling left out of history and America itself” (Takaki 5). While certainly appreciative of the achievements

⁴⁶ Black History Month began as Negro History Week, started by scholar and historian Dr. Carter G. Woodson in the 1920s. The government would officially recognize what eventually became Black History Month in 1976. For more details on Black History Month, see Goggin and Jaynes. For another critical take on the commemorative event, see Pitre, et. al. For more insight into the idea of exceptionalism as a way to understand ethnicity, see the next chapter, especially the sections on Nicole Krauss’s *Great House*.

that occasioned Black History Month in the first place, Johnson thus points out that these multicultural celebrations respond to the Master Narrative of American blackness in a very limited way by privileging certain stories over others. Such master narratives further draw attention to the unrealistic expectations set up by these stories; Johnson's perceived distance from historical heroes are exacerbated by the sense that they appear extraordinary, exceptional to the lived experiences of himself and others like him. Similarly, by presenting an intimate and imperfect portrayal of her family—one that does not solely seek the kind of unattainable feats or celebratory commemorations that Johnson describes above, Riel instead writes a collaborative history of her ethnic identity.

While Takaki attempts to speak back to the apparatuses that he feels are controlling these histories—the K-12 school system (or what he calls “the curriculum”), the media, businesses, and governments, it is these same authoritative institutions that often now dictate the multicultural histories of the major events and figures who are said to define each ethnic group. In other words, these organizations profess to present the previously ignored “truth” of each group in ways that are ethical because their stories now supposedly include all individuals and their histories. Not only that, but these institutions further present these histories in ways that appear to uphold their authorial power to tell and retell these narratives. Despite Johnson's obvious privilege in publishing in a forum like *The Atlantic*,⁴⁷ he nonetheless suggests that many like himself

⁴⁷ *The Atlantic*, which began as *The Atlantic Monthly* in 1857 in Boston, is a magazine with an auspicious history whose founding sponsors included Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Ellery Sedgwick reports that many of its most prominent editors, including William Dean Howells and James Russell Lowell, sought to make *The Atlantic* a publication that “could shape the national culture or establish widely recognized standards of literary and ethical value” (Sedgwick 317). According to their 2014 media press kit, their circulation in 2013 was 477,900, and their mission statement

are not as advantaged as these institutions in telling these stories, or in choosing which stories get told. The people who Johnson witnesses in his everyday life do not fit the supposedly authentic and ethical narratives of ethnic identity that apparently represent him.

The transethnic, metafictional writing that Riel practices in *Shadow Tag* actually hinges on a multi-layered version of witnessing which we might call “meta-witnessing” or what I refer to in this chapter as “rewitnessing”: the text calls the reader forth as a witness to its self-reflexivity and ideas about ethnicity while, simultaneously, characters and/or structural elements within the text itself bear witness to the text’s construction and the construction of their own ethnic identities. Readers and characters who take part in the story thus witness both the events taking place, as well as the composition of those events into narrative. This relationship represents collaboration through writing, which takes the form of an interconnection between characters and between the reader and text through awareness of composition and the self. Significantly, the collaboration begins with the knowledge that no one person is a more authentic or exceptional representative of ethnicity than another. It is important to note, though, that this interconnection is not equivalent to the ethos of tolerance and social consensus that characterizes multiculturalism. Instead, drawing attention to collaborative writing, these authors further expose the power exerted by storytellers and historians in general. They confront the

touts the publication as “the source of opinion, commentary, and analysis for America’s most influential individuals who wish to be challenged, informed, and entertained” (1). The fact that Johnson’s statement draws attention to idealistic elements of Black History Month from which he is excluded is particularly intriguing given that the Declaration of Purpose in the magazine’s first issue stated that it will be the proponent of the singular “American idea. . . endeavoring always to keep in view that moral element which transcends all persons and parties, and which alone makes the basis of a true and lasting prosperity.”

challenges inherent in writing in such a way that honors the events portrayed, knowing that, as witnesses, they must also contend ethically with the power that their roles as authors prescribe. At the same time, they have to deal with the conflict of composition while avoiding the creation of yet another Master Narrative.

The author-protagonists of Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and Foer's *Everything is Illuminated* certainly understand the tensions between creative composition, power, and the responsibility of witnessing. In fact, the paired protagonists—both Díaz's Yunior and Oscar and Foer's Jonathan and Alex—experience those tensions firsthand, each person finding in the other not immediate friendship, but rather ongoing contestation and, eventually, hard-fought companionship reluctantly won through writing to, and about, each other. By problematizing the omniscience that Riel claims, these author-protagonists foster relationships that highlight the uncomfortable oppositions and unavoidable incompleteness found in writing the story of another. Part of the protagonists' answer to this tension lies in interconnectivity. In the specific terms of my discussion, and even more openly and explicitly than the literary characters examined in the previous chapter, these protagonists' transethnic impulse lies in crossing barriers over and against multiculturalism's ossified rubrics of authenticity. Knowing that discomfort and a lack of resolution is fundamental to their writing relationships, these characters embrace the fallibility of witnessing and the unknowability inherent in telling anyone's story, including one's own. This chapter focuses on Díaz's and Foer's author-protagonists in part because Yunior and Jonathan's writing methods fall somewhere in between Riel's presumed omniscience and Sol's explicit and obsessive revision. In

particular, Yunior and Jonathan engage in some of the fictionalized imaginings that Riel practices in her writing, but they also make those acts of creativity plain by embracing subject positions and modes of storytelling that conventional multiculturalism would deem as digressive, inaccurate, or weak. Because they present, for example, stories that do not resemble those of the institutions Takaki mentions above, they may be deemed by these institutions as unethical and inauthentic authors and representatives. Yunior and Jonathan however, present their alternative storytelling as justification for ethical compositions that counter the “would-be” definitive historical narratives of ethnicity embraced by events such as Black History Month. These writer-characters thus collaborate in unconventional ways, using their conflicting experiences and testimonies to create a personal and thus more complex and verisimilar image of ethnicity. They consequently bear witness to actual events that take place in the narrative, but also to imagined occurrences and inaccessible silences—what Yunior refers to as *páginas en blanco*, or blank pages. Metafictional authors like Díaz and Foer allow readers to witness these imperfect acts of witnessing and to recognize the personal in the political, and vice versa. Yunior, Oscar, Alex, and Jonathan learn that multiculturalism’s tendency to favor one “authentic” version of history or method of storytelling is unsustainable given their own experiences, uncertainties, and subjectivities.

This chapter explores metafictional responses to this emphasis on what Johnson called the “anomalous stories” told by those in power, narratives built on reified expectations of authenticity. Multicultural history has prominently pursued testimony that values an accuracy that is unchanging and, finally, unattainable. As Johnson reminds us,

even institutions that purport to champion such ideals often relegate literature—especially fiction—to a separate area of culture and treat fiction as supplementary, even secondary, to “authentic” historical events. Rather than presenting history as unchanging and one-sided, the acts of fictionalized transethnic witnessing explored in this chapter embrace dynamic truths through collaborative, personal, and intimate negotiations, constituting not a single story, but a shared responsibility for uncovering multiple truths. By providing an alternative to this “authentic” form of storytelling, Díaz and Foer’s texts thus offer different answers to the questions of “Who gets to tell the stories? And to whom do these stories belong?” As novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie asserts in a speech entitled “The Danger of a Single Story,” “Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person.” Elementary textbooks and multicultural events tell, as Adichie might describe it, a “single story” of each ethnic group and its history, one that covers over forms of witnessing that do not match standard expectations. As Gino Pellegrini points out, “liberal multiculturalism makes it the business of nation-states to allocate individuals to a particular cultural group and to teach them the cultural history of their group” (172). *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* and *Everything is Illuminated* challenge, as we shall discover, multiculturalism’s designated cultural histories and the way such stories and histories are presented. By focusing on collaboration and contestation and by endorsing marginalized and unconventional storytellers, these texts show how those whom classical multiculturalism has deemed as unqualified to witness do in fact have valid perspectives to contribute. In the first half of the chapter, I argue that Díaz’s novel presents dictatorial storytelling—

that is, telling the single story at the expense of other stories and storytellers—as a form of unethical witnessing that upholds the notion of a singular authenticity, a Dominican hypermasculinity that the author-narrator Yunion manages to overcome only by embracing Oscar’s form of collaborative, ethical writing. Oscar’s haunting presence as a witness or watcher to Yunion’s narrative encourages Yunion to write ethically by exposing the active role that witnesses have in influencing positive action. Focusing on Foer’s text, the second half of the chapter complicates two forms of supposedly “false” witnessing—the liar and the plagiarist—that actually help combat the problematic notion of authenticity. While it may seem unusual to draw attention to these questionable roles as having the potential for decent storytelling, I argue that these forms of witnessing hinge on interconnections and interactions between characters and between the reader and the text. Ultimately, these texts argue for fiction, or what Alex calls “not-truths,” as valid and ethical ways of presenting history in response to institutions that would deem their methods of storytelling, or even the stories themselves, as inauthentic. Metafiction’s self-reflexivity and disruptions of linearity generate the kind of witnessing necessary to embrace testimony’s imperfections, truth’s elusiveness, and ethnic identity’s highly complex and heterogeneous formation across multiple frameworks.

Foer’s author-characters, Jonathan and his Ukrainian translator Alex, provide an example of this cautious, ethical form of collaborative writing. When Alex first meets Jonathan, he writes that he was initially “underwhelmed to the maximum” (32). Alex recalls that the writer “did not appear like either the Americans I had witnessed in magazines, with yellow hairs and muscles, or the Jews from the history books, with no

hairs and prominent bones” (32). Alex is extrapolating from popular notions of what an “authentic” American or Jewish person should be and is initially perplexed when Jonathan meets none of these expectations. While we as readers are unsure whether Jonathan had similar expectations of Alex, Jonathan’s own apprehensiveness—with himself and with Alex—is clear throughout the text. Writing to him weeks after the first meeting, Alex admits, “One part of your letter made me most melancholy. It was the part when you said that you do not know anybody, and how that encompasses even you. I understand very much what you are saying. . . (With our writing, we are reminding each other of things. We are making one story, yes?)” (144). Alex draws attention to the unknowability of his and Jonathan’s stories, but also to the impulse to share what they *do* know, and to write together what they cannot write apart. Intriguingly, both Foer and Díaz’s novels conclude with the protagonists realizing both the frustrations and benefits of composing their shared stories. Thus, even in the very nature of the stories they tell, these novels push against an overemphasis on the supposedly authentic end result of historical encounters to instead concentrate on the process itself and the interactions that emerge. Supporting the “single stories” of ethnic groups often means upholding a categorical and romantic notion of authenticity as being true to oneself in the face of assimilation—a kind of individualism that Charles Taylor notes potentially “both flattens and narrows our lives, makes them poorer in meaning, and less concerned with others of society” (4). Instead, these intimate encounters reveal how one must first start with the connections between writing individuals, or even with the self-reflexive writing that Taylor would characterize as narcissistic, and move outward to encompass what Glissant

calls creolization, or “hybridity without limits, hybridity whose elements are multiplied, and whose end-results are impossible to foresee” (*Poetics* 46). In a kind of reversal of conventional writing, then, the stories start with the interaction between writing individuals and end with the unforeseeable blank page. In this way, Foer and Díaz mobilize metafiction to add nuance to the notion of authenticity, showing how this idea can cross borders and even lead to the wider outlook that Taylor believes may be lost in individualism. This dynamic authenticity—a “transauthenticity,” if you will—upholds multiple stories and modes of storytelling in pursuit of more ethical ethnic histories.

Power, Fukú Storytelling, and Páginas en Blanco: Filling the Silences in *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*

I suppose / that at first, it was people who invented borders, / and then borders / started to invent people. . . Real history will start / when all borders are gone.
--Yevgeny Yevtushenko, “Fukú”

It is telling that, despite the forcefulness with which Yunior makes his presence known on the page, very few critics deal extensively with the writing relationship that occasions the story—specifically the primary narrator of the text Yunior and his sometimes friend Oscar, whose own fiction and non-fiction writing never grace the pages beyond quotes from letters he writes to Yunior and his sister Lola. In the novel, Yunior recounts his complicated friendship with outcast nerd Oscar and the troubled history of Oscar’s family—his mother Beli and his sister’s arguments in the wake of Beli’s cancer, his grandfather Abelard’s run-ins with the Dominican dictator Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina, and even Oscar’s own fatal romance with Ybón, girlfriend of a Trujillo-like cop

with corrupt government connections and a brutish temper. Surprisingly, despite Yuniór's words and perspective dominating the novel's commentary, Latino literature scholar Richard Perez goes so far as to identify only two protagonists in the text, Oscar and his mother Beli; he attributes Yuniór's narration directly to Díaz (91). Toward the end of the article, Perez finally makes mention of Yuniór, not as a fellow protagonist and narrator, or even as Oscar's best friend, but instead as "one of the cool kids in school who decides to 'fix Oscar's life'" (104). On the contrary, focusing on the writing and witnessing relationship between Oscar and Yuniór reveals the transethnic collaboration at the heart of the novel, showing ethnicity as mobilized not by institutions like the government or the university, but via intimate and self-conflicted moments of connection and witnessing.

For his part, Yuniór has learned that the so-called definitive story of the Dominican nation-state is directly tied to masculinity; his family and the other Dominicans and Dominican Americans that he knows classify the "authentic" Dominican specifically as hypermasculine. To counter this internally imposed benchmark of legitimacy, Díaz instead promotes a transethnic definition of ethnicity from the bottom-up, an understanding of identity that is immediately personal, multiple, and involved. Bearing witness normally suggests passivity and a safe distance from which to see but not necessarily become involved in the observed events. However, Yuniór reveals that definitions of ethnicity openly resist closure by confronting the *páginas en blanco* while writing about the de León family's experiences and his own experiences of Dominican Americanness and masculinity. Witnessing in this sense takes on active qualities of

storytelling and personal connection; Yunior tells his story knowing that the act unavoidably implicates and involves himself in the events and people he describes. This deliberately incomplete and highly concerned and collaborative witnessing thus becomes the means by which Yunior begins to comprehend his gender, ethnicity, and the violence associated with his Dominican ancestry.

Yunior begins by giving the history of fukú and, in the process, justifying and defending his authorship. Not unlike the opening of a bedtime story, Yunior starts by explaining fukú's origins, writing, "They say it came first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved; that it was the death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and another began. . . *Fukú americanus*, or more colloquially, fukú—generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and Doom of the New World" (1). Yunior further connect his fukú history to the present day, naming as its "hypeman" the Dominican dictator and ultimate hypermasculine representative, Trujillo (2). Yunior's association of fukú first with slavery and blight, then more specifically with Columbus, European colonization, and finally Trujillo,⁴⁸ centers fukú americanus in ongoing relations of masculine power and authority, concepts that are central to Yunior's writing life as well as his relationship with Oscar. Yunior who, like Oscar, is well-versed in the lore of Tolkien, Marvel and DC comics, and other fantasy and science fiction

⁴⁸ Díaz (via Yunior) pointedly remarks in the novel that Trujillo's is "one of the longest, most damaging U.S.-backed dictatorships in the Western hemisphere" (3). In an interview with Meghan O'Rourke, Díaz adds, "Trujillo was one of the U.S.'s favorite sons, one of its children. He was created and sustained by the U.S.'s political-military machine. I wanted to write about the demon child of the U.S., the one who was inflicted upon the Dominican Republic."

figures, places fukú in a magical realist context.⁴⁹ In his mythical introduction, Yuniór situates the concept of authority in only one direction: that of the hold that fukú—and, by extension, Oscar—has over Yuniór’s thoughts and actions. Yuniór tells the reader, “I have a fukú story too. I wish I could say it was the best of the lot—fukú number one—but I can’t. . . . It just happens to be the one that’s got its fingers around my throat” (6). The fact that Oscar and the de León family in general “weren’t a clan you could just shake off” (194) becomes the impetus behind Yuniór’s witnessing and writing about this particular fukú story.

Yuniór’s introduction belies the masculine power that he himself exerts in his writing. While his opening suggests that Oscar and his family fuel his storytelling, Yuniór actually spends the majority of the novel denying Oscar’s authority over him. Encountering Oscar on Halloween dressed up as Doctor Who along with two fellow writing students, Yuniór relates that he “couldn’t believe how much [Oscar] looked like that fat homo Oscar Wilde, and I told him so” (180). Noting that Oscar’s companion asks, in seriousness, “quién es Oscar Wao” (or “who is Oscar Wao?”), Yuniór continues, “And the tragedy? After a couple of weeks dude started answering to” the derogatory nickname (180).⁵⁰ Yuniór, in relating this anecdote, reveals more embarrassment for Oscar than shame for his persecution of Oscar, belying his own resemblance to the title character:

⁴⁹ Oscar and Yuniór’s preoccupation with comic books, as Díaz himself suggests in multiple interviews, certainly has much to do with their marginal status as young Dominican Americans, and comic book heroes own marginality as existing outside of normative, even “human” spaces. Another work of transethnic metafiction, Michael Chabon’s *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* similarly recognizes this trope.

⁵⁰ Like Sol in *The Gun Dealers’ Daughter*, Yuniór undoubtedly knows the power of naming, evident not only in his refusal to mention Christopher Columbus by name in the introduction (he refers to him, out of superstitious caution, only as the Admiral [1]), but also through the association of naming with science fiction and fantasy genres. For examples of this connection, see Janet Brennan Croft.

Yunior notably shares enough of a likeness with Oscar to know of Wilde in the first place, a quality not found in their fellow classmates. Also, while Yunior, unlike Oscar and his friends, does not identify outright as a writer, he does write secretly and is obviously the diegetic author of Díaz's novel. Finally, Yunior perfectly comprehends Oscar's constant references to aspects of sci-fi cultures, and drops a multitude of similar allusions in his own writing. Yunior's deliberate failure to note these and other similarities reveals his fallibility in passively witnessing Oscar's story. Yunior renames Oscar to belittle the latter's "un-Dominican" failure at hypermasculinity and inability to get a girlfriend, what Yunior calls "the worst case of no-toto-itis I'd ever seen" (12, 173). In actuality, Yunior's bullying and his writing about this bullying deflect attention away from his inability to relate to Oscar or the reader. Writing becomes an evasion, a way for Yunior to forefend his own demons; Oscar has a hold over him and his writing, but not in any way that Yunior is willing to admit. The fact that Yunior ostensibly names his tale, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (rather than *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar de León*) attests both to Yunior's deliberate distance from Oscar, and his attempt to maintain a precarious hold over his ethnic identity by exerting power over another's story. Oscar thus becomes the witness who Yunior attempts to outrun.

Discussing the wrath of Trujillo, Yunior gives context to the way his similarities to Oscar initially fuels, rather than discourages, his harassment both in person and on paper. In one of Yunior's many footnotes, he describes Trujillo's persecution, torture, and

eventual murder of Jesús de Galíndez, a student who wrote a dissertation on the despot.⁵¹

Musing on Galíndez's dogged persistence in writing his study, Yunior asks,

What is it with Dictators and Writers, anyway? Since before the infamous Caesar-Ovid war they've had beef. Like the Fantastic Four and Galactus, like the X-Men and the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants, like the Teen Titans and Death-stroke, Foreman and Ali, Morrison and Crouch,⁵² Sammy and Sergio, they seemed destined to be eternally linked in the Halls of Battle. Rushdie claims that tyrants and scribblers are natural antagonists, but I think that's too simple; it lets writers off pretty easy. Dictators, in my opinion, just know competition when they see it. Same with writers. *Like, after all, recognizes like.* (97)

Yunior too knows that "like recognizes like." If he realizes his similarities to Oscar—as fellow genre enthusiast, writer, nerd, and, most significantly for Yunior, a man who falls short of the perfect hypermasculinity he associates with Dominican men—he knows it is very likely that the intelligent Oscar will do the same. Yunior is unable to rectify his likenesses to Oscar, and between writers and dictators in general, with his own need to disregard the part of himself that is too much like the not-so-masculine title character. Yunior's initial tactic, then, is to preemptively deny their connection and to hide behind the power of fukú and Trujillo by disguising his own dictatorial storytelling as mere

⁵¹ There is, in fact, an actual Jesús de Galíndez who, like the fictional Galíndez in the novel, attended Columbia University, during which he wrote a study in 1956 entitled "Trujillo's Dominican Republic: A Case Study of Latin American Dictatorship." Robert Crassweller confirms Yunior/Díaz's account of the dissertation's aftermath, writing that Galíndez's disappearance shortly after the thesis's completion caused pandemonium and attracted widespread American attention to Trujillo (312-6). Galíndez's dissertation presumably formed the basis for his posthumously published book, *The Era of Trujillo, Dominican Dictator*.

⁵² In an interview with Paula M.L. Moya, Díaz characterizes the clash between author Toni Morrison and literary critic Stanley Crouch as "part of a whole backlash against the growing success and importance of women-of-color writers — but from men of color. . . . Every time I heard these [Frank] Chin-[Ishmael] Reed-Crouch attacks, even I, as a male, would feel the weight of oppression on me, on my physical body, increased." This clash over bodies continues in the passage with reference to athlete Sammy Sosa and bachata singer Sergio Vargas, who were rumored to have fought over Sosa's wife, as well as the boxers George Foreman and Muhammad Ali.

sympathetic charity. It is no coincidence that Yunior refers to Galíndez as “that poor doomed nerd”—Galíndez is in fact one of several writers Yunior mentions as having felt the wrath of Trujillo’s power (97-8). When Oscar’s sister Lola tells Yunior that “[t]en million Trujillos is all we are” (324), she is alluding to the afflicted and inexorable authority that comes with being the surviving witnesses to atrocity, the only ones physically able to tell, retell, and even “dictate” the tale, and who must, in turn contend with the power wrought in doing so. At a conference on race in Maryland, Díaz himself echoes Lola, stating, “We are fundamentally comprised of the oppressions we resist.”

Not unlike the Marcoses in the Philippines, Trujillo’s dictatorship centered on controlling the national narrative and manufacturing a particular world and worldview in order to dictate the story of the Dominican nation-state. The dictators, then, write the stories of their people, prescribing who is allowed to claim citizenship in their nations. Yunior fears that his role as witness and storyteller—his ability to determine which stories get told and about whom—potentially places himself in a similar position. How, then, can someone like Yunior presume to write these tales for Oscar and his family and to define their ethnic history without being complicit in the kind of complete destruction wrought by dictatorial actions like Trujillo’s? Halfway through the novel, Yunior begins to answer that question through a transethnic form of writing that starts taking into account more than just his own potentially dictatorial perspective. Thus, in a novel that has more than one ending, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* can also claim more than one beginning, and not unlike Yunior’s first introduction, this one, too, commences with an explanation of fukú. Beginning again, Yunior writes, “When the [de León] family

talks about it at all—which is like never, they always begin in the same place: with Abelard and the Bad Thing he said about Trujillo” (211). While he goes on to explain what Abelard, Oscar’s grandfather, allegedly said that unleashes Trujillo’s wrath upon the Cabral family, Yunior cannot help but interject in a footnote that “[t]here are other beginnings certainly, better ones, to be sure—if you ask me I would have started when the Spaniards ‘discovered’ the New World—or when the U.S. invaded Santo Domingo in 1916—but if this was the opening that the de Leóns chose for themselves, then who am I to question their historiography?” (211). Yunior actually does start with this beginning in the novel. However, he now offers, in a mode similar to Apostol’s protagonist Sol, a revision prompted by this writerly collaboration with the Cabral and de León families, thus showing his willingness to be a more attentive witness and to allow others to influence his storytelling. By metafictionally foregrounding his writerly involvement and the debate underpinning how the story should be told, Yunior allows his readers to see both the political and the personal, the “accurate” and the “inaccurate,” and the way that these interact to define not only Dominican Americanness, but ethnicity in general. While Yunior purportedly shares the story of Oscar, he also simultaneously describes his own coming of age.⁵³

Yunior’s newfound motivation for a more collaborative mode of storytelling is catalyzed by several major life-changing events. First, Yunior lets slip out one of the few biographical details of his own life present in the text: Somewhere in the interim between

⁵³ In many ways the shift from the Yunior that is presented in Díaz’s earlier short stories to that of the narrator of *Oscar Wao* also reflects this coming-of age, Maja Horn pointing out that *Oscar Wao* has “a historical dimension that is largely absent in Díaz’s first published work *Drown* (1996), which reaches generally no further back than its young protagonists’ earliest childhood” (127).

parts and chapters, he has lost his brother to leukemia (167). This offhand mention of an encounter with mortality and vulnerability, exacerbated by his own near-death experience after arrogantly assuming he could take on several young men in a fight (167), ignites the second major series of events prompting Yuniór's transformation as a more ethical witness—namely, Yuniór experiences a deep connection with another person, Oscar's sister Lola. It is notable that this intimacy was not of a sexual nature, though Yuniór is undoubtedly attracted to her. Rather, Lola took care of Yuniór as he recovered, making sure that he ate well and kept up with his schoolwork and personal hygiene. "In other words," Yuniór explained, Lola "sewed my balls back on, and not any woman can do that for a guy. . . . At college you're not supposed to care about anything. . . . but believe it or not, I cared about Lola. . . . Lola like the fucking opposite of the girls I usually macked on" (168). This momentary closeness reveals an alternative to his conventional understanding of Dominican Americanness as fueled by Trujillo-inspired bullying and hypermasculinity. In fact, mirroring Yuniór's near-success with Lola, Oscar's own awakening comes not in the form of the sexuality Yuniór claims is paramount to Dominican Americanness, but rather in "little intimacies" he encounters with his girlfriend Ybón, "like combing her hair or getting her underwear off a line or watching her walk naked to the bathroom or the way she would suddenly sit on his lap and put her face into his neck" (334). Yuniór's inability to maintain a monogamous relationship with Lola bears out the dictatorial hold that his current notions of hypermasculine ethnicity have over his identity. Because Yuniór cannot fully shake off what he perceives as a direct connection between a Trujillo-like hypermasculinity and Dominican identity, he

finds himself without the tools needed to sustain a stable relationship. In contrast, Oscar's eventual success with Ybón suggests that Oscar would have had much to teach Yunior about such moments of companionship.

Nonetheless, Yunior's fleeting closeness with Lola leads not only to his willingness to collaborate with the de León family in terms of his storytelling, but also to his volunteering to room with Oscar in the latter's dormitory, an artist's haven called Demarest. Yunior is in disbelief at his own actions, marveling, "Me, a guy who could bench 340 pounds, who used to call Demarest Homo Hall like it was nothing" (170). This readiness to actively engage in Oscar's life signifies that Yunior is finally, albeit reluctantly, beginning to contend with their likeness and his own role as an involved witness. In his writing, he admits, "I liked to play it [that is, his involvement with Oscar] as complete philanthropy, but that's not exactly true. Sure, I wanted to help Lola out, watch out for her crazy-ass brother. . . but I was also taking care of my own damn self" (170). In fact, while Oscar is ostensibly preoccupied with superheroes and legend, Yunior is the one who must realize he is not as tough as he claims to be. As Yunior and Oscar might say, even Superman had his K-Metal. Confronting his vulnerability by opening himself up to intimate bonds with Lola and Oscar in turn incites Yunior to realize his own shortcomings, moving him to share his authorship with others. Part of this revised authorship involves accepting that if he alone is an inadequate storyteller and witness, and that the potential to avoid a dictatorial mode of storytelling is itself insufficient, then a complete and accurate account of *any* kind may be impossible. Even beyond the

monumental teleology that introduces the story in the context of the eternal scourge, fukú, Yunior realizes that the story is never complete.

This lack of closure and completion becomes a thematic element that haunts Yunior and Oscar's shared story, most specifically in the form of silences and blank pages. For instance, Beli and her mother La Inca, troubled by Beli's own near-death escape from Trujillo as a child, refuse to yield their story to Yunior's witnessing, creating what he calls "their very own página en blanco" (78).⁵⁴ After relating, via stories like Galíndez's and Beli's, the way that Trujillo perpetuates his particular form of silence and silencing, Yunior is left to contend with his own gaps of knowledge and understanding, his own role as an imperfect writer and witness. He finally admits, "Even your Watcher has his silences, his páginas en blanco" (149). Yunior's writing is actually haunted by lost books, the first being the lost book about Trujillo that supposedly gets Abelard killed. Piecing together the story from accounts he gets from Lola, Beli, and La Inca, Yunior describes the book as "an exposé of the supernatural roots of the Trujillo regime." He adds, "Alas, the grimoire [or book of magic] in question (so the story goes) was conveniently destroyed after Abelard was arrested. No copies survived. . . What can I tell you? In Santo Domingo a story is not a story unless it casts a supernatural shadow" (245-6). In fact, nothing of Abelard's writing is said to have survived.

After Oscar's death at the novel's end, a similar lost book haunts Yunior. He details that in Oscar's last letter to Lola from Santo Domingo, Oscar asked her to look out for a second package, a story that "contains everything I've written on this journey.

⁵⁴ Of this and related silences, Yunior offers, "I'll give you what I've managed to unearth and the rest will have to wait for the day the páginas en blanco finally speak" (119)

Everything I think you will need. You'll understand when you read my conclusions. (It's the cure to what ails us, he scribbled in the margins. The Cosmo DNA.)" (334). True to form, the package fails to arrive. If Oscar is to be believed, this second lost book of the Cabral/de León clan would have provided closure to the everlasting plague of fukú that has wrought his family. Oscar's bold claim suggests that the lost package maybe even contained answers to comprehending fukú's effects on Dominicans and Dominican Americans in general. While Oscar's lost book is certainly a tragedy, its disappearance is not surprising. Of Abelard's death, a mirror to Oscar's own, Yunior writes, "So which was it? you ask. An accident, a conspiracy, or a fukú? The only answer I can give you is the least satisfying: you'll have to decide for yourself. What's certain is that nothing's certain. We are trawling in silences here" (243). The lost books of Abelard and Oscar suggest that rather than a magical book, the answers lie in the actual process of writing, of ceaselessly filling up blank pages with the stories of those still willing to witness them.

Yunior, then, is compelled to write because of his perceived responsibility in carrying the story forward. In fact, he is haunted in his dreams by his need to do so. After Oscar's death, Yunior has a recurring dream where Oscar constantly makes failed attempts at communication. This dream is followed by another, where they are in a book-filled room. Oscar "is holding up a book, waving for me to take a closer look, and I recognize the scene from one of his crazy movies. . . I notice that Oscar's hands are seamless and the book's pages are blank. And that behind his mask his eyes are smiling" (324). Yunior recognizes the dream—in some ways a nightmare—as a kind of zafa, or a charm to offset the effects of fukú. In the introduction, Yunior explains that many

believed zafa to be “one surefire counterspell that would keep you and your family safe. . . Even now as I write these words I wonder if this book ain’t a zafa of sorts. My very own counterspell” (6-7). Yunior’s recurring dream, as much a creation of the dreamer as it is of the subject, is a subconsciously collaborative attempt to identify a form of zafa in the lines of a blank book waiting to be filled. Yunior, as well as Oscar who had a similar dream, are both disturbed by silences and blank pages and are compelled by others to tell their stories. In these unwritten sheets, Yunior finds a new form of collaborative power and resistance. The renewal represents an opportunity to tell a story that exerts less definitive power and makes fewer claims to authenticity, one that belongs to more than just one person. The blank pages refer to productive open-endedness—to a world without lines or borders, with Oscar’s “seamless” hands hearkening to his confident and happy childhood, or maybe even earlier, to a time in the womb where he was unaware of where he stopped and the rest of the world began.

Yunior and Oscar’s dreams thus imply moments of connection through writing, and writing through connection. Suggested by this tautology is the very nature of witnessing. As social historian John Durham Peters explains, bearing witness “involves an epistemological gap whose bridging is always fraught with difficulty. No transfusion of consciousness is possible. Words can be exchanged, experiences cannot. . . . Witnessing is a discourse with a hole in it that awaits filling” (Peters 26). Yunior and Oscar expand this practice transethnically, redefining witnessing as a blank book that is never completely written. Oscar, as avid a reader as he is a writer, leaves behind a circled panel from Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* in which the misguided Adrian Veidt asks Dr.

Manhattan, “I did the right thing, didn’t I? It all worked out in the end.” Manhattan replies, “In the end”? Nothing ends, Adrian. Nothing ever ends” (Moore XII.27.iv-vii). Yuniór fails to comprehend Oscar’s intentions in underscoring this panel until he moves away from his own narcissism enough to take a few lessons from Oscar: He falls in love with a woman and, more importantly, he “write[s] a lot. From can’t see in the morning to can’t see at night. Learned that from Oscar” (327). He also stores Oscar’s remaining writings and books in four refrigerators in his basement, these being “the best proof against fire, against earthquake, against almost anything” (330). He sets himself to writing his and Oscar’s shared story, but he knows that he will have to save as much as he can in order to adequately pass on the blank book to the next generation of writers and witnesses.

Who Watches the Watcher?

Circled by Oscar, someone who Yuniór insists “never defaced a book in his life” (331), Adrian Veidt’s haunting question in Moore’s *Watchmen* (“I did the right thing, didn’t I?”) casts a ghostly shadow over Yuniór’s writing. Veidt, popularly touted throughout Moore’s text as “the smartest man on the planet,” experiences in the highlighted panel an emotion that for him is very rare—namely, doubt. This rare sense of doubt is shared by several characters in Díaz’s novel, but most especially by Yuniór. Like Veidt, Yuniór, in his witnessing and writing about Oscar and his family, has a firsthand view to another’s misfortune and finds himself wondering: Is it enough to passively witness another’s experience, or should one endeavor to do more? And, if one does

commit, how much involvement is too much? For Yunior, who becomes conscious of his dictatorial tendencies only through his writing about Oscar, these questions boil down to a matter of storytelling: Specifically, Yunior must contend with how much of the story does he tell, and how much should he leave to another person—or even, as suggested by Oscar, to the blank pages of history and obscurity. Any balance that Yunior might attain would have to be offset by his own dictatorial narcissism and by his ability to move beyond the definitive and “authentic” story of Dominicaness, defined most apparently by him and several others in the novel as an overpowering hypermasculinity. Also similar to Moore’s graphic narrative, Díaz’s novel contains several kinds of watchmen. This section focuses on two types in particular—Uatu the Watcher, with whom Yunior identifies, and the parigüayo, which roughly translates to “bystander,” but has connotations that suggest foolishness. This latter term is one that is derogatorily used by several characters, often in reference to Oscar. In fact, this section argues that, while Yunior does act as witness to the de León family’s story, it is Oscar’s witnessing of Yunior that spurs the latter’s attempts to overcome expectations of hypermasculinity as the primary defining characteristic of authentic Dominican American identity. The title of Moore’s *The Watchmen* originates from a question posed by Roman satirist Juvenal: “Who watches the watchmen?” (“Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?”). Oscar, the butt of many jokes because of his love of science fiction, his incessant writing, and his social awkwardness, is in many ways an answer to this question. While Oscar is himself a writer—in actuality, Yunior implies that Oscar is a far more prolific writer than himself—Oscar as watcher of the watchmen is also characterized as the quintessential

reader, a witness to Yuniór's struggles with his own ethnic identity. As Yuniór continues to write about and subsequently involve himself in the lives of the de León family, Oscar becomes a distorted mirror against which Yuniór measures his attempts to overcome the dictatorial hold represented by his overperformance of masculinity.

What Yuniór, Beli, and other characters in the text define as authentic Dominican masculinity is actually somewhat more complicated. Of its wider Latino equivalent, Gloria Anzaldúa goes so far as to affirm, "The modern meaning of the word, '*machismo*,' as well as the concept, is actually an Anglo invention. . . The loss of sense of dignity and respect in the macho [spurned by a shame that Anzaldúa attributes to Anglo inadequacies] breeds a false machismo that leads him to put down women and even to brutalize them" (105).⁵⁵ Most scholars would not go so far as Anzaldúa, and even Díaz in numerous interviews associates this hypermasculinity with Trujillo rather than with any American or Anglo figure. Nonetheless, Maja Horn points out that as "Díaz himself has ascertained in several public presentations interviews, he does not consider U.S. masculinity any less problematic or noxious than the Dominican forms of masculinity that he addresses in his writings" (131). Horn actually suggests that the text more appropriately presents masculinity as a hybrid effect of interactions between Dominican and American cultures. If Yuniór represents the result of Trujillo's dictatorial maleness and ethnic Dominican identity in diasporic form, then the text posits that Yuniór is not all that far removed from his masculine roots in the Republic and that, in many ways, U.S.

⁵⁵ John Riofrio defines machismo as "a manliness that overpowers and in fact seems to spill over, an excess of masculinity" (24). While we should in no way wholly conflate versions of Latino masculinity, Caribbean studies scholar Silvio Torres-Salliant does use the phrase "machismo" in relation to the Dominican Republic in several of his texts (104). See, for example, his article, "Dominican Americans."

multiculturalism helped perpetuate Yunior's understanding of how masculinity should manifest itself in an American setting. Horn notes that Americans actually imported their own form of masculinity to the Dominican republic during what Yunior calls "the First American Occupation of the DR, which ran from 1916 to 1924" (Díaz 19). She adds that the U.S. military men's "repertoires of masculinity—in fact, U.S. diasporic repertoires. . . resonate strongly with the hegemonic notions of Dominican masculinity" (138). While Horn is right to underscore connections between Dominican and American masculinities, she minimizes Oscar's role in maintaining a balance against the kind of hegemonic masculinity that she insists Díaz valorizes in his text. In fact, as one who watches the *Watcher*, Oscar also presents a counter to Yunior's form of masculinity, offering in its place intimate connections that counter "authentic" ideas of Dominicaness.

Yunior demeans this other form of masculinity when he explains how, because of his failures to make friends and attract female attention, Oscar had "become the neighborhood *parigüayo*" (19). In an extensive footnote, Yunior explains, "The pejorative *parigüayo*, *Watchers* agree, is a corruption of the English neologism 'party watcher'" (19). Like Horn, Yunior explains how, during U.S.'s first Dominican occupation, "members of the American Occupying Forces would often attend Dominican parties but instead of joining in the fun the Outlanders would simply stand at the edge of dances and *watch*. . . .⁵⁶ The kid who don't dance, who ain't got game, who lets people clown him—he's the *parigüayo*" (19-20, emphasis his).

⁵⁶ The term "Outlanders" refers in the most general sense to persons living a marginalized existence geographically and/or socially. Within the world of *Oscar Wao*, three other potential references to the term include Diana Gabaldon's *Outlander* series, Mark Ellis's series known as *Outlanders*, and a manga comic series of the same name by Johji Manabe. All three narrative sequences are notable for the ways in which

While historians Alejandro Paulino and Aquiles Castro would most likely concur with parts of Yunió's colorful definition, they actually situate the term's etymology in the United States' *second*—rather than first—occupation of the Dominican Republic from 1965 to 1966 (304-5). The context of the second American occupation suggested by Yunió's invocation of *parigüayo* actually speaks directly to the questions that plague Veidt and Yunió about active involvement versus passive witnessing. When the Constitutionalists (supporters of Juan Bosch, the Dominican Republic's first democratically elected president) took back the government from a military coup made up primarily of Trujillistas known as the Loyalists, the United States intervened, ultimately sending in over 42,000 troops to Santo Domingo to combat the Constitutionalists, who then-President Lyndon Johnson believed to have communist ties. America's intervention, as Eric Thomas Chester notes, ignited a new wave of U.S. involvement in Latin America (3). The predominant story, presented by critics like Russell Crandall and James Nash, is one of *positive* U.S. intervention to help uphold democracy in the face of impending communism.⁵⁷ Political science professor Jonathan Hartlyn, however, shows this story is much more complicated, noting that while America did intercede "out of an exaggerated fear of a 'second Cuba,' [. . .] not only was the intervention itself unrelated to democracy promotion, but it *inhibited* potential democratic progress in the country" (60, 89, emphasis mine). In response to those who suggest in

the title characters' marginalization allows them to access knowledge and strengths not as readily available to those inside the margins. In other words, the protagonists are themselves witnesses or watchmen, outsiders who become involved in the worlds from which they are initially distanced.

⁵⁷ Nash and Crandall's studies appear in some ways to echo that of Samuel Flagg Bemis, who referred to interventions in the Caribbean as humanitarian efforts that pitted "imperialism against imperialism" (386), evoked only "short-lived benevolent imperialism" (x), or represented, in the case of Theodore Roosevelt, a "policy of protective imperialism" (110).

retrospect that U.S. intervention ultimately had advantageous effects despite the struggles that immediately followed, Hartlyn points out that the changes in the Dominican Republic's political and financial infrastructure was "an unintentional by-product of the initial U.S. decision to intervene; the intervention itself was not related to seeking either democracy or economic development in the Dominican Republic, but to perceived U.S. security concerns" (92).⁵⁸ The American intervention appears motivated by self-interest, not unlike the narcissism that characterizes the hypermasculine Trujillo and, on a less extreme level, Yuniors himself. While there is no guarantee of what would have resulted without US intervention, Hartlyn notes that any "potential transition from below [was] thwarted by U.S. intervention" (95). Hartlyn's challenge to historians to not allow the ends to justify the means suggests that, had someone been watching the watchers, the story of the Dominican Republic could have evolved much differently. Suddenly, the bystanders were intervening, causing what Hartlyn would argue were permanent, negative effects.

The account behind the so-called "party watchers" mirrors the role that multiculturalism plays in imposing what Nancy Fraser describes as a "moral pressure on individual members to conform to group culture" (24). While many might sympathize with pleas to recognize and tolerate the history and practices of other cultures, we have to question the identities of those who are included, as well as the storytellers themselves. In other words, we need to foreground the complications in choosing who gets to tell the

⁵⁸ Hartlyn further points out that historically in the Caribbean and Central American region in general, US intervention has often "worked directly against democratic forces" (93). Whether these forces were democratic or not is thus part of the controversy.

stories, and whose experiences are ultimately incorporated into the “definitive” story of a culture and heritage. In 1965 Dominican Republic, the American parigüayos heavily intervened in an ostensibly domestic conflict, though their motives and their level of involvement signaled, as Hartlyn suggests, an overstepping of national and political bounds. In his storytelling, Yuniór is similarly faced with several levels of intervention. One possible level of intervention that Yuniór briefly explores is to allow someone else to tell the story; for the “Wildwood” section of the novel, Lola does take over the storytelling from her own perspective in order to detail her relationship with her mother Beli and Beli’s discovery of her cancer. Lola also introduces Part II of the novel in a way that appears to be a letter to Yuniór. Detailing her bittersweet departure from Santo Domingo, Lola writes, “I don’t think I really stopped [crying] until I met you” (210).⁵⁹ Aside from Lola’s writing, Yuniór shifts from his dictatorial storytelling to sharing the stage, as mentioned above, with the de León family, beginning again by detailing Abelard’s run-in with Trujillo.

What’s missing from these alternatives is the one that would allow Oscar to contribute to the storytelling. He is, after all, the man whose name graces the title. His relegation to the role of the feminized parigüayo may suggest someone who stands on the sidelines, but the etymology of the term certainly characterizes this form of witnessing as being far from ineffectual. In fact, as if in defense of the world that would dismiss him as a parigüayo, Oscar eventually uses his writing as a deliberate and empowering escape from the world, telling his friends, “I’ve been working on my fifth novel. . . It’s

⁵⁹ Lola herself is an author, writing a poem that she reads at Beli’s funeral (323).

amazing” (33). Yuniór explains that, prior to this, when Oscar’s “so-called friends would hurt him or drag his trust through the mud he always crawled voluntarily back into the abuse, out of fear and loneliness, something he’d always hated himself for, but not this time. If there existed in his high school years any one moment he took pride in it was clearly this one” (33). Oscar seeks real connection and intimacy in his writing and in his friendships. In place of the false friends who dismiss him as a mere ineffectual bystander, Oscar thus begins to privilege his own writing and to seek transauthentic relations with others.

Oscar, in fact, finds writing, researching, and human interconnection to be interrelated. In emphasizing this mode of authorship, Díaz therefore presents Oscar not only as the text’s quintessential historian and writer but also as the story’s most ethical witness—one who bases his writing less on power and influence and more on collaboration. Oscar, in fact, remains a writer to the very end. On his final trip to Santo Domingo to try to win over Ybón, La Inca discovers him in her home, where he “had gotten out all of La Inca’s photographs, was going through each and every one. . . . For twenty-seven days he did two things: he researched-wrote and he chased [Ybón]” (316-7). Oscar’s equating of intimacy with researching and writing allows him to write his lost book, the one that he purports would free his family from the dictatorial hold of fukú. Particularly compared to the promiscuous Yuniór, Oscar’s proficiency in writing and in maintaining a close relationship with a woman despite his supposedly emasculated status as a parigüayo thus begs the question: Why do we not see Oscar telling his own story? A possible answer to this question lies in Yuniór’s own assumed form of witnessing.

Frequently referring to himself as the Watcher, Yuniór actually identifies himself specifically with Uatu, one of the members of an extraterrestrial species called the Watchers who scrutinize the activities of other species. To put it simply, the Watchers are the witnesses of the universe. Not to be confused with Moore's *Watchmen*, the Watchers appear in writer Stan Lee and artist Jack Kirby's comic, *Fantastic Four*. In fact, Díaz's first epigraph, "Of what import are brief, nameless lives. . . to Galactus?" invokes Uatu, often known simply as The Watcher. Uatu's attempts to intervene in Earth's affairs, most notably in his endeavor to protect the world from the dictatorial "world-devourer" Galactus,⁶⁰ represent the struggles of a witness who cannot remain passive. Yuniór actually describes how Uatu tries to keep himself confined to "the Blue Side of the Moon" (20) in order to attempt to control his passion for those whom he witnesses. While the comic world has its own opinions on whether Uatu has overstepped his bounds in violating his oath of non-interference, Yuniór has his own take, explaining, "it's hard as a Third Worlder not to feel a certain amount of affinity for Uatu the Watcher; he resides in the hidden Blue Area of the Moon and we DarkZoners reside (to quote Glissant) on "*la face cachée de la Terre*" (Earth's hidden face)" (Díaz 92), or what Michael Dash, in "History and Literature," translates to "the hidden side of the earth" (Glissant 76). In fact, as much as Uatu, Glissant fuels Yuniór's obsessive need to assume authorship over the de León's fukú story.

⁶⁰ In an introduction to the fifth volume of a *Fantastic Four* compilation, creator Stan Lee describes Galactus as "an evil-doer who had almost godlike powers" who lives off of "the life force and energy from living planets" (ii). Yuniór invokes similar qualities in his mythical descriptions of Trujillo.

Yunior actually takes Glissant's descriptions of History and Literature as an authorization to be a more active and inclusive Watcher in the tale, and to do so through his authorship. The capitalized versions of History and Literature represent, according to Glissant, a "highly functional fantasy of the West, originating at the time when it alone 'made' the history of the world" (64). Glissant illustrates the "double hegemony" of History and Literature as totalizing forces that have controlled narratives of identity for those who Yunior describes as "Third Worlders" (Glissant "History" 76, Díaz 92). Glissant thus calls for a reformation of Literature, one that "should let the weight of lived experience 'slip in.'"⁶¹ He proclaims, "Literature is not only fragmented, it is henceforth shared. In it lie histories and the voice of the people. We must reflect on a new relationship between history and literature. We need to live it differently" ("History" 77). Glissant thus advocates a more interrelated version of history, a witnessing that also involves recreating the history of a people through the act of writing literature. As Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko writes in a poem actually titled "Fukú," "Real history will start / when all borders are gone." Just as Oscar and Yunior pursue a sense of intimate connections in their life and writing, Glissant is appealing for those writing on Earth's hidden face to share their stories in the hopes of working toward that "real" history.

Despite Glissant's call to action and his emphasis on cooperation, Yunior's reluctance to admit his closeness to Oscar and to acknowledge their likeness shows how,

⁶¹ Glissant's proclamation recalls the impetus behind Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which she declares she wrote in order to present the atrocities of slavery in a novel form, as a "living dramatic reality" (450). For more on the relationship between literary form and the real, see the conclusion.

even in bearing witness to Oscar's life, he is hesitant to lend Oscar the power to tell his tale. Such is the hold that Dominican American expectations of hypermasculinity have on Yuniór that he is unable to give up his writing to the neighborhood parigüayo. In fact, it is only after Oscar's death that Yuniór concedes. He relates, "Took ten years to the day, went through more lousy shit than you could imagine, was lost for a good long while—no Lola, no me, no nothing—until finally I woke up next to somebody I didn't give two shits about, my upper lip covered in coke-snot and coke-blood and I said, OK, Wao, OK. You win" (325). At this late point near the end of the novel, Yuniór finally acknowledges what Díaz, in an interview with fellow Caribbean novelist Edwidge Danticat, describes as "true" witnessing. Díaz points out that while the de León family is still in denial about fukú's hold over their lives, they are "protecting the final daughter, Isis, from it collectively, and that's close, very close to my dream of us bearing witness to (in Glissant's words) 'the past, to which we were subjected, which has not yet emerged as history for us (but that) is however, obsessively present'" (Díaz 90). In Lola's daughter Isis, named for the Egyptian protector the dead,⁶² both Díaz and Yuniór find the hope for a continued, collaborative witnessing of the lived experiences of people such as Oscar and his family. Yuniór imagines that once she learns of the fukú, Isis will eventually request to investigate the four refrigerators in which Yuniór has protected what remains

⁶² As to be expected, Isis is also a DC Comics character. Yuniór mentions the superhero in his call for "Oh Mighty Isis" to improve Oscar's failed love life (17). Díaz further connects Isis, the Egyptian goddess, to Yuniór's hypermasculinity, reminding interviewer Paula Moya that Isis reassembles her lover and brother Osiris, but leaves out his penis. Díaz explains, "I've always thought, the thing with Yuniór is that he couldn't reassemble himself in a way that would leave out the metaphoric penis, that would leave out all his attachments to his masculine, patriarchal, phallocratic privileges. Which is what he needed to do to finally 'get' Lola. In the end, Yuniór is left. . . with not much. No Lola, no Isis, no Oscar." For more on the relationship between transethnicity and death or ghostliness, see the concluding chapter.

of the books that Oscar has read or written. Yuniors muses, “if she’s as smart and as brave as I’m expecting she’ll be, she’ll take all we’ve done and all we’ve learned and add her own insights and she’ll put an end to it. That is what, on my best days, I hope. What I dream” (330-1). In fact, what Yuniors hopes for Isis is a form of authorship not unlike what Irene intended for Riel in Erdrich’s *Shadow Tag*—that is, a continuing attempt to get the stories right—to complicate or write them transethnically, and to collaborate with writings and writers of the past to work toward ethical revision and transauthenticity. In describing the Egyptian goddess Isis, R.E. Witt notes that she was “oldest of the old. . . the goddess from whom all Becoming arose” (14). In Isis, then, lies Yuniors’s third and final attempt to begin the story again.

Embracing the False Witness: Collaboration and Not-Truths in Foer’s *Everything is Illuminated*

Suzy Song: Do you want lies or truth?
Thomas: I want both.
--*Smoke Signals* (1998)

When one thinks of a witness in the more modern, traditional sense—for example, as a spectator to a crime— notions of collusion and corroboration replace that of collaboration. In other words, conventional wisdom sets witness testimonies *against* each other to purportedly get at the Truth, the solitary and “correct” account of what really happened, rather than seeing how witnesses speak *to* each other to reach collective, interacting, and more complex truths. Corroboration suggests a strengthening confirmation of one specific and authentic Truth, while collaboration suggests different

perspectives that collide, interrelate, and occasionally harmonize. As a witness to the de León family, Yúnior imagines a future writing collaboration with and through Isis, and even capitulates—however posthumously and reluctantly—to Oscar’s version of Dominican American masculinity in the face of everything he thought he previously knew. The collaboration between Foer’s protagonists Jonathan Safran Foer (hereby referred to as “Jonathan” to avoid confusion with the author) and Alex “Sasha” Perchov, while not as reticent or contentious as that of Oscar and Yúnior, similarly attempts to witness a truth that demands multiple ways of seeing, writing, and understanding. While Díaz’s text deals with the legacy of the Trujillo dictatorship and Foer’s with the lasting impact of Nazi occupation, both novels provide testimony to these enduring historical influences through intimate, transethnic perspectives that reveal experiences alternative to those commonly embraced by classical multiculturalism as the most “authentic” accounts.

A consideration of the testimonies surrounding the Trujillo dictatorship versus Nazi occupation, Jewish oppression, and the Holocaust reveals the wide range of narrative components surrounding witnessing. One of the most prominent concerns for the authors in this chapter is that of genre—specifically of fiction or non-fiction as they relate to this idea of accuracy and transauthenticity. Arguably the most famous writings about Trujillo—not just Díaz’s text, but also those of authors like Julia Alvarez and Mario Vargas Llosa⁶³—take the form of fiction. Popular Jewish writing, however, has

⁶³ Scholars commonly cite Alvarez’s *How the Garcia Girls Lost their Accents* (1991) and *In the Time of the Butterflies* (1994), as well as Llosa’s *The Feast of the Goat* as examples of fiction that references the Trujillo dictatorship. Other possible examples include Manuel Vásquez Montalbán’s *Galíndez*, Gabriel García Márquez’s *The Autumn of the Patriarch* (1975), and Enrique Lafourcade’s *La Fiesta del Rey Acab*

traditionally differed in this respect. Whether it is the writing of Anne Frank, Elie Wiesel, Viktor E. Frankl, or Primo Levi, fiction is often not the most prominent choice for popular publishers and “consumers” of Holocaust-related texts.⁶⁴ On the collecting of testimony regarding the genocide of the Jews, Holocaust historian Annette Wieviorka writes, “No other historical event, not even World War I—when the practice of recording testimonies first became common—has given rise to such a movement, which is so vast and long-lasting that no research can pretend to master it in its entirety” (xi). These numerous testimonies often come with the expectation of a specific kind of historical authenticity. Holocaust survivor Henry Wermuth goes so far as to have what Zoë Vania Waxman describes as a “very literal take on the role of the witness—to counteract false belief and prove something to be true [which thus] makes very particular demands of the survivor-writer: it demands objectivity” (Waxman 154). As a result of this vital need to counteract falsity and skepticism, non-fictional testimonies of the Holocaust overwhelm in sheer volume, if not in genre.

Nonetheless, a consideration of recent Jewish American literature reveals that, as with the stories of Trujillo, fiction may soon become the more recurrent mode as well, particularly when regarding the popularity of contemporary novelists like Michael Chabon, Myla Goldberg, Dara Horn, Nathan Englander, and Nicole Krauss, some of

(*King Ahab's Feast*, 1959). Of the many literary allusions in Díaz's text, Yunió explicitly highlights both Llosa and Alvarez in his descriptions of the conversations surrounding Trujillo (244, 83).

⁶⁴ To illustrate, a recent appraisal of Amazon bestsellers related specifically to the Holocaust shows that, with the exception of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* series, the majority of the top spots are held by firsthand survivor accounts.

whom constitute what David Sax calls “The New Yiddishists.”⁶⁵ (One must also consider the practical matter that living Holocaust survivors are lessening in number.)

Multicultural education has traditionally demarcated lines between fiction and non-fiction, even when—in the case of someone like Primo Levi—a prominent representative of an ethnic group attempts to act as a witness to and in both genres. What, then, does fiction offer these authors, author-protagonists and, more significantly, their readers and audience members, that non-fiction does not? Foer (both the biographical author and the fictional protagonist Jonathan) specifically accesses fiction to capture a different experience and understanding of Jewish history, what Alex repeatedly calls “not-truths.”⁶⁶ In turn, in his intradiegetic writing, Jonathan not only opts for fiction, but verges into magical realist fiction, a subgenre explicitly removed from the realism and accuracy that ostensibly characterizes Alex’s responses in return. In this section, I argue that Alex’s supposedly realistic accounts and Jonathan’s explicitly fictionalized form of witnessing, which together emphasize collaboration rather than corroboration, seek a different kind of truth beyond that offered by previous “non-fiction” forms of witnessing.

⁶⁵ Sax identifies the New Yiddishists as “[e]qually comfortable with their American and Jewish identities [and] responsible for a renaissance in Jewish storytelling that is turning the narrative of assimilation on its head.” Jewish fiction from outside the United States is also becoming popular in America. Take, for example, Geraldine Brooks’ *People of the Book* (2008), Bernard Schlink’s *The Reader* (1995), and Markus Zusak’s *The Book Thief* (2005), the two latter books both recently adapted to film in 2008 and 2013, respectively.

⁶⁶ In a different but related mode, novelist Michael Chabon has explained how he writes fiction in order to draw attention to Jews in history as swashbuckling warriors, quite unlike their popular depictions today. See for example, Chabon’s *Telegraph* article written in conjunction with his 2007 serial adventure, *Gentleman of the Road*, where he reveals the novel’s original title as being “Jews with Swords.” In fact, in some ways Chabon works against the shy and awkward persona invoked by Foer’s protagonist Jonathan, though Jonathan’s own attempts to present alternative histories of the Jewish experience are similar to Chabon’s. It’s significant to note, too, that this image of masculinity is in stark contrast to the hypermasculinity that Díaz identifies as central to conceptions of Dominican Americans. Jonathan Freedman notes that the de-masculinized Jewish male intellectual was embraced precisely “because of his difference from robust WASP norms of masculinity” (Freedman 91).

In pursuing these not-truths, Jonathan and Alex embrace a history that allows for multiple and shared understandings of ethnicity.⁶⁷

Many metafictional authors have struggled with explaining the challenges of conveying truth in and through fiction. Tim O'Brien and Sherman Alexie are two authors in particular who have faced similar challenges, and whose perspectives can provide insight into Díaz and Foer's explorations of truth and authenticity. Tim O'Brien, the author of (and author-character in) the Vietnam War novel *The Things They Carried* (1990), differentiates between the truths of fiction and non-fiction by describing how "a thing may happen and be a total lie, another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth. . . . It comes down to gut instinct. A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe" (O'Brien 80, 74). He later goes on to name these distinctions, insisting that "story-truth is sometimes truer than happening-truth" (O'Brien 171). For O'Brien, story-truth is experienced emotionally, even physiologically, and often in contrast to happening-truth.⁶⁸ The protagonist Tim witnesses events that both do and do not occur, and writes down what he feels to be true about each occurrence, regardless of whether they match his or his comrades' actual experiences. While Foer and even Díaz may certainly sympathize with this notion of story-truth, the way that O'Brien presents this concept is without the collaborative impulse crucial to Jonathan and Alex's writing.

Instead, O'Brien is unapologetic, even suspicious, in face of readers who perceive his

⁶⁷ As explained in the introduction, for purposes of this study, I focus on ethnic identity and here on Jewish ethnicity, with the recognition that identity constitutes an assemblage of other valences that may include class, nationality, gender, and other identity markers.

⁶⁸ Tobey C. Herzog describes O'Brien's narrative style and method as willful and deliberate dishonesty, stating that the writer "has vigorously defended this narrative deceit as an effective technique for introducing listeners to the complex intermingling of facts, fiction, truth, lies, memory, and imagination underlying all of his writing and inherent in creating fiction" (895).

dictatorial bending of the truth as trickery, betrayal, or manipulation; the author insists that his “narrative deception is in the readers’ best interests” (Herzog 895-6). Unlike Yuniors who openly admits to his silences, his reliance on others’ accounts, and even his forays into poetic license (149, 132),⁶⁹ O’Brien deceives first, and then defends the deception.

There is significantly less scholarship on novelist and short story writer Sherman Alexie’s notion of reservation realism, though Alexie’s description more closely resembles Alex and Jonathan’s ideas of not-truths in *Everything is Illuminated*. Alexie presents the concept of reservation realism in the introduction to the second edition of his short story cycle, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993). His explanation of the term matches or even exceeds O’Brien’s dismissal of factuality and accuracy but admits to its status as a partial perspective. Alexie concedes that his narratives “are the vision of one individual looking at the lives of his family and his entire tribe, so these stories are necessarily biased, incomplete, exaggerated, deluded, and often just plain wrong. But in trying to make them true and real, I am writing what might be called reservation realism” (xxi). Not unlike Sol and Irene’s embrace of disorder and disintegration described in the previous chapter, Alexie asserts that, foregrounded thus, incompleteness and delusion is its own kind of truth. The notion of the reservation, while referring most obviously to the federally mandated lands for Native Americans, also

⁶⁹ In an oft-quoted footnote, Yuniors tells his readers that he wrote a first draft in which “Samaná was actually Jarabacoa, but then my girl Leonie, resident expert on all things Domo, pointed out that there are no beaches in Jarabacoa.” He states that she also “informed me that the perrito wasn’t popularized until the late eighties, early nineties, but that was one detail I couldn’t change, just liked the image too much. Forgive me, historians of popular dance, forgive me!” (132). In a metafictional move that he deploys in various ways throughout the text, Yuniors points to a moment of composition where he veers away from a presumed fact, but draws attention to this rhetorical choice.

suggests storing or setting aside (“reserving”). If we consider realism in the most literal sense as being a tendency toward accuracy and truth, then reservation realism can refer to the possibility of a single author maintaining and then setting aside conventional ideas of veracity, while also drawing attention to this different, “wrong” kind of truth. Alexie’s form of fiction thus becomes, as Raymond Federman describes it, “artifice but not artificial” (55).

In *Everything is Illuminated*, Alex and Jonathan work together to understand and then complicate the ethics of conventional witnessing and truth in a similar fashion, negotiating and arguing over what should count for truth and accuracy, as well as for “authentic” forms of Jewish storytelling. Before the book’s opening, Jonathan attempts to track down a woman who helped his grandfather escape the Nazis in a Ukrainian town called Trachimbrod during World War II. In what *The Guardian*’s John Mullan describes as “ambitiously bad English,” Jonathan’s somewhat competent translator Alex writes letters to Jonathan followed by chapters in which Alex recalls the details of Jonathan’s quest and the experiences he, Jonathan, and Alex’s grandfather had in searching for the woman, whom they call Augustine. In turn, Jonathan responds to Alex’s accounts with magical realist recreations of the lives of his great-great-great-great-grandmother Brod and his grandfather Safran as he imagined them taking place in mythical Trachimbrod in the 1800s and the 1940s. Readers, in comparing Jonathan’s fantastical history against Alex’s memoir-like recounting, are at first led to believe that Alex is the more reliable narrator. In fact, early on in the text, Alex exposes anachronisms and cultural confusions in Jonathan’s writing, wondering, “Are you being a humorous writer

here, or an uninformed one?" (25, 142). Though readers lack direct access to Jonathan's letters, Alex himself reveals Jonathan's willingness to bend the truth when convenient; for example, Alex assures him that he will omit mentioning Jonathan's fear of dogs in his account, and also agrees to revise observations that Jonathan is "severely short" (31, 53). While Alex initially appears to be the voice of reason and accuracy, the text goes on to challenge classical associations of truthfulness with realistic fiction, exposing how Jonathan and Alex's not-truths provide an alternative, but nonetheless faithful, understanding of Jewish history. These two authors create a writing relationship based on collaborative dissensus—that is, a collective understanding that attempts to encompass both of their troubled and even contrasting perspectives of the past and understandings of truth, as derived through their shared writing process.

In fact, Alex and Jonathan's contestations within their writing relationship help them understand the responsibility associated with truthful witnessing. Alex is shocked to learn from Jonathan that the Ukrainian Jews initially welcomed Nazi intervention with the hopes that the Nazis would provide them security against their countrymen (62), and is then shattered by knowledge of his own grandfather's complicity in exposing his best friend Herschel at gunpoint to the Nazis (252). Both events constitute moments of distress for Alex compounded with Jonathan's historical insight into his family's loss during the Holocaust, inciting Alex to pursue other possibilities for truth. Cathy Caruth invokes Yunior and Oscar's struggles with the blank page when she writes, "For the survivor of trauma, then, the truth of the event may reside not only in its brutal facts, but also in the way that their occurrence defies simple comprehension. The flashback or

traumatic reenactment conveys, that is, both *the truth of an event*, and *the truth of its incomprehensibility*” (153, emphasis hers). As Alex learns more of his family and country’s involvement with Jewish oppression and, by extension, with Jonathan’s own tragedies, Alex becomes all the more fearful of witnessing manifestations of the happening-truth—or what he calls truth “in the actual” (240)—in their writings. Alex’s early request to Jonathan that he “be truthful, but also please be benevolent” (26) in regards to his writerly feedback later evolves to a desperate appeal for Jonathan to diverge from the inevitable atrocity that will plague his magical realist tale. “If I could utter a proposal,” Alex requests, “please allow Brod to be happy. Please. Is this such an impossible thing? Perhaps she could still exist, and be proximal with your grandfather Safran” (143). The same reader and fellow writer who once called out Jonathan’s potentially anachronistic mention of a disc-blade saw in his Trachimbrod writings now requests that Jonathan combine the lives of two people—ancestors divided by a century, no less—to manufacture a sense of happiness for characters whose real-life equivalents had no such luck.

Alex’s transformed attitude toward the truth derives from his inability to reconcile what counted for accuracy and authenticity in the past with what he knows and feels to be true in the present. For example, despite his learning about his grandfather’s coerced participation in Herschel’s death, Alex insists on his grandfather’s goodness. In one of many parenthetical remarks to Jonathan, Alex writes, “(You could alter it, Jonathan. For him, not for me. Your novel is now verging on the war. It is possible.) He is a good person, alive in a bad time. . . . A bad person is someone who does not lament his bad

actions. Grandfather is now dying because of his. I beseech you to forgive us, to make us better than we are” (145). Jonathan’s ultimate resistance to Alex’s entreaty exposes the instability of conflicting truths, and shows that Jonathan holds fast to a form of Jewish history that he imagines as attributable to Brod and Safran. Jonathan’s magical realism, and even Alex’s various not-truths throughout his writing, allow their own forms of accuracy unhampered by conventional understandings of history. The collaborative story that Jonathan and Alex create is rife with these moments of truths in conflict, drawing attention to the importance of multiple stories and dynamic perspectives when determining the history of a people or an ethnic group. Rather than a corroborative form of witnessing, or one that dictates trickery as being what is “best” for the reader, Jonathan and Alex as fellow readers and writers of each other’s words together pursue a transauthentic history, one that is definitively wrought in conflict and collaboration.

Psychoanalyst Dori Laub acknowledges a hierarchical privilege attached to O’Brien’s idea of “happening-truth,” which he notably refers to in various instances as the “real truth.” Nonetheless, his experiences rewitnessing and recording the testimony of Holocaust survivors—that is, being a watcher of the watchers—give insight into manifestations of truth in traumatic histories. Laub states that witnessing both

makes and breaks a promise: the promise of the testimony as a realization of the truth. On the one hand, the process of the testimony does in fact hold out the promise of truth as the return of a sane, normal, and connected world. On the other hand, because of its very commitment to truth, the testimony enforces at least a partial breach, failure and relinquishment of this promise. . . . There is no healing reunion with those who are and continue to be, missing, no recapture or restoration of what has been lost. . . . The testimony aspires to recapture the lost truth of that reality, but the realization of the testimony is not the fulfillment of this promise. (Laub 73)

Laub describes the testimony of a man who, as a child, somehow manages to reunite with his mother after liberation. He had sustained himself by sharing his testimony with his mother's image in a photograph, but is then disconcerted at his reunion to see his mother as emaciated and haggard, so unlike the vibrant woman in his mind. Similar to Alex confronting the conflicting images of his grandfather, the boy cannot reconcile the imagined connections that kept him alive during his separation with all that now stands before him in this reunion. Laub notably refers to this former understanding as a "lost truth," invoking the idea of an alternative reality. We might describe this reality, then, as a *fiction*, not unlike the fantastical stories Jonathan writes in his Trachimbrod chapters. The not-truth that exists alongside the "real" truth is what kept the boy alive, and Laub is right to describe the unlikely reunion between mother and son as "miraculous" (71). However, there is also a magical element in the boy's authorship which allowed him first to sustain himself by testifying to his imagined mother in the photograph, and then—so many decades later—to retell his stories to Laub, thus "reclaim[ing] his position as a witness" (70).

In fact, Laub locates this reclamation of truth not in the child's original act of witnessing, but in the grown man's retelling of this childhood as an adult, elevating this meta-writing and rewitnessing of history to a level of importance with the original act itself. In other words, the catharsis of both witness and listener are strengthened by the man's account of the two truths that existed simultaneously while he was a child, as well as—most importantly—by the connections wrought in retelling both the lost and "real" truth to the interviewer himself. Laub is well aware of this shared accountability, noting

that “the interviewer-listener takes on the responsibility for bearing witness that previously the narrator felt he bore alone, and therefore could not carry out. It is the encounter and the coming together between the survivor and the listener, which makes possible something like a repossession of the act of witnessing” (69). A similar model of witnessing and rewatching pervades Alex and Jonathan’s writerly conversation. Alex tells what he feels is the reality of their shared experience, and he and Jonathan reconfigure this reality based on their differing perspectives. Jonathan then writes the Trachimbrod chapters constituted of not-truths, an alternative reality that is no longer recoverable and for which he, Alex, Alex’s grandfather, and even the readers of the hybrid text itself, claim responsibility in the present. Finally, these not-truths, in turn, challenge readers’ “authentic” understanding of Jewish ethnicity and history.

The inability to recover the various realities of Jonathan’s past fuels his writing of this substitute history, with Alex as his witness to what holds “true” to the characters’ lives for whom they are now both accountable. In one of the few moments where he explicitly portrays himself as the narrator and Brod and Safran’s descendent, Jonathan describes Safran’s promiscuity and then notes that his grandfather “was so afraid of being discovered [as having multiple lovers] that even in his journal—the only written record I have of his life before he met my grandmother, in a displaced-persons camp after the war—he never mentions them once” (169). For example, while Safran reports in his journal simply that he went to the theater, Jonathan goes on to add that this seemingly mundane outing was also the same “day he had sex with his first virgin” (170). Jonathan goes on to describe the encounter at the theater with the woman named Lista, and how

she represented the first of many shtetl women with whom the precociously virile Safran interacted. Jonathan here reveals himself to Alex and his fellow readers as a writer who witnesses, and then must record, that which did *not* happen—a fiction that constitutes an alternative truth. Both Alex and Jonathan continue this fictional practice in real life when, at the end of their arduous quest, they find Lista, but insist on referring to her throughout their writings as Augustine. At the end of his voyage, Jonathan has neither found (the real) Augustine, Trachimbrod (which exists now only as a patch of grass and a modest historical marker), nor the means by which Brod and Safran can become real to him in the present. He is subsequently denied access to his role as witness—in the conventional sense of passive observer—of his grandfather’s past. As Safran himself thinks, “The only thing more painful than being an active forgetter is to be inert rememberer” (260). Fueled mainly by inert remembrances, both Jonathan’s magical realist writings of Trachimbrod, as well as his exchange of texts with Alex, constitute an attempt to establish surrogates for this perceived lack of witnesses and memories in Jewish history.

This spillover of fiction into reality, of not-truths into happening-truths and vice versa, culminates in the end of the novel, when Alex’s grandfather writes a note to Jonathan before committing suicide. Alex’s presence in this last letter is implied by his role as Jonathan’s hired translator and witness to all that follows. Earlier in the text, Alex describes picking up Jonathan’s notebook and reading an entry. The entry describes Alex confronting his father and telling him “that he would take care of the family, that he would understand if his father had to leave and never return, and that it would not even make him less of a father” (160). Alex does not make any comment on Jonathan’s

imagined scenario, but admits that Jonathan's writing "made me angry, but then it made me sad, and then it made me so grateful, and then it made me angry again, and I went through these feelings hundreds of times, stopping on each for only a moment and then moving to the next" (160). His grandfather's suicide note, which constitutes the novel's concluding pages, is meant to have similar emotional effects. Alex's grandfather relates a recent encounter Alex has with his father as being part of a series of events that ultimately prompts the grandfather's suicide. In an eerie metafictional move, the account his grandfather writes matches word-for-word that which Alex had read in Jonathan's notebook several weeks before. The magical realism of Jonathan's Trachimbrod chapters thus overruns Alex and his grandfather's writings, representing an interweaving of both Alex and Jonathan's ideas of truth and not-truth through an act of implicit plagiarism. The following section explores how Jonathan and Alex together present plagiarism as an act of shared complicity in order to deliberately destabilize this imbalance of possession and power in storytelling.

Plagiarism and Likeness in Translation

At one point in Foer's novel, Alex chides Jonathan on his not-truths regarding Safran, demanding to know, "How can you do this to your grandfather, writing about his life in such a manner? Could you write in this manner if he was alive? And if not, what does that signify?" (178-9). Echoing the often bowdlerized versions of multicultural Jewish history, Alex initially perceives Jonathan's writings about his grandfather as lacking respect, and calls his authorship and honor into question. Alex continues, "if we

are to be such nomads with the truth, why do we not make the story more premium than life? It seems to me that we are making the story even inferior. . . I do not think that there are any limits to how excellent we could make life seem” (179-180). Given the fantastical elements of Jonathan’s contributions to the novel, Alex’s questions are fair. If Díaz’s and Foer’s texts argue for the possibilities of other truths beyond the authentic Truth with a capital T, what stops them from presenting a truth that romanticizes an imperfect world? Unlike Díaz, who allows Yunion nearly full ownership and control over the text in order to expose the issues surrounding tyrannical storytelling, Foer instead chooses to work from the other side, relinquishing Jonathan’s power (and maybe his responsibility) to answer Alex’s questions by omitting his responses altogether. While potentially less explicit and open than Díaz’s method,⁷⁰ this rhetorical move reveals Foer’s trust in both Alex and the reader to unearth the truths of Jonathan’s reactions in Alex’s writings. Just as Trachimbrod remains only as a patch of grass on which stands a modest monument, Jonathan’s omitted responses are its own blank book whose pages are filled by Jonathan’s magical meanderings and Alex’s remembrances, but also by the readers who, like Erdrich’s Riel, are empowered with interpreting the stories transethnically and in tandem.

Dwelling on the three concluding sections of the novel—Alex’s ultimate letter to Jonathan, followed by Jonathan’s last section of the Trachimbrod chapters, and finally, the grandfather’s suicide note to Jonathan—can reveal more clearly how this notion of

⁷⁰ It should be noted that Díaz often critically analyzes his own power as a writer. In his interview with O’Rourke, he states, “Just remember: In dictatorships, only one person is really allowed to speak. And when I write a book or a story, I too am the only one speaking, no matter how I hide behind my characters.”

collaborative witnessing opens up a transethnic understanding of storytelling and ownership, showing why Jonathan resists the fairy-tale ending that Alex demands and the “perfect” and authentic story to which classical multiculturalism often lays claim. Jonathan’s final Trachimbrod chapter ends in destructive bombings, the Nazis threatening to shoot survivors, and a dream of Trachimbroders drowning themselves in order to escape the brutal chaos. Devastated by Jonathan’s gruesome conclusion, Alex protests, “I would never command you to write a story that is as it occurred in the actual, but I would command you to make your story faithful. . . . You [that is, Jonathan, Brod, and Safran] are all cowards because you live in a world that is ‘once-removed,’ if I may excerpt you” (240). Alex here makes distinctions between truth and not-truth that he was, up until this point, unable to articulate. Surprisingly, he admits that what makes Jonathan’s story unfaithful is not its infidelity to the happening-truth, but rather its detachment from the world of potential readers who might have found hope in Jonathan’s version of the story. Alex feels that the stories most capable of encouraging change in the world of readers like himself must first inspire the possibility of improvement in the first place. Alex, as a fellow reader and writer, thus attempts to take ownership of the story by positing an approach to historical writing situated in affecting the real world toward positive action and activism. As Alex tells Jonathan, “It is true, I am certain, that you will write very many more books than I will, but it is me, not you, who was born to be the writer” (145). Alex defines writing not by its content, but by its ultimate effect and intention. Readers may thus conclude that the magical realist flourishes that Jonathan uses to recapture his lost history ultimately fail to convince Alex of the value of Jonathan’s imagined

witnessing. However, hidden in the last letter of the novel written by Alex's grandfather is an act of plagiarism that suggests otherwise.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* tracks the etymology of the word "plagiarism" back to the Latin *plagiārius*, which refers to a "person who abducts the child or slave of another, kidnapper, seducer." This history associates the word with the kidnapping or theft of someone powerless—even someone deemed a possession. When expanded to the idea of literary theft, the notion of strength still holds, as evidenced by Raymond Federman's connection between masterpieces and masters (56), Roland Barthes' invocation of the Author-God (128), and Rebecca Moore Howard's historical study of authorship as being associated primarily with masculinity, rationality, and strength (477-8).⁷¹ Jonathan (and by implication, Foer) ultimately entrusts his story to Alex, a man who speaks imperfect English and who lacks knowledge of Jewish oppression in his home country; in other words, like the uneasy agreement that the protagonist Frank strikes with the narrator in Morrison's *Home*, Foer's conclusion presents Jonathan willingly giving up ownership of his story to another. In so doing, the novel complicates the importance of authenticity, originality, and experience when dealing with traumatic events like the Holocaust. Concluding with the grandfather's letter further represents Jonathan and Alex mutually passing on their authorial powers to this older, tortured man who, in saving his wife and child, pointed his finger at his best friend, marking him for death at the hands of

⁷¹ Howard goes on to explain how plagiarism has also been historically associated with disease and sexual desecration of the female: "The rape metaphor for plagiarism further establishes that women are not subjects, capable of the *volition* that is plagiarism. They are instead objects, property, subject to *violation*" (484, emphasis hers). Continuing the notion of human possession and violation, OED's etymology of the word "plagiarism" includes reference to a 1673 account by E. Browne that reports "Captives and Slaves. . . fell into that condition. . . by treachery. . . [or] chance of warr; others by Plagiary, and man-stealing Tartars."

the Nazis. Speaking about the dynamics of possessing and controlling one's story, Michael Berenbaum confronts notions of ownership and authorship in what he calls the "Americanization of the Holocaust." As Project Director of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Berenbaum presents this phenomenon in a primarily positive light, stating that the "tide of Americanization cannot be easily avoided because in order for Israeli scholarship to move beyond its shores, it must reach out to its Western brethren. For Jews to solidify the place of the Holocaust within Jewish consciousness, they must establish its importance for the American people as a whole" (16). While we can certainly dispute Berenbaum's monolithic characterization of the West and his potential American exceptionalism, it is important to contemplate his assertion that the Holocaust has become "integrated. . . into American culture. Today, the event is understood differently in Washington, Warsaw, Paris, and Jerusalem" (qtd. in Wieviorka 118). Berenbaum argues that acknowledging how different audiences will interpret the Holocaust and connect it to their own experiences shows an accessibility that is "contrary to Elie Wiesel's definition of the Holocaust as a world apart, not belonging to our world" (qtd. in Wieviorka 118). Ultimately, Berenbaum is challenging notions of authentic authorship, suggesting that this and other stories like it no longer belong to one particular kind of storyteller. He echoes Alex's idea that stories should be translatable in such a way as to provide hope and promote activism and change.

While such notions are certainly admirable, how can we expand Alex and Berenbaum's ideas beyond the conventional multiculturalism they uphold to contemplate the transethnic approach explored in Foer's text? Not surprisingly, a concurrent look at

Jonathan and Alex's final words provides us an answer, one that also responds to the dynamic that Berenbaum (via Wiesel) mentions of the Holocaust as being "a world apart," an observation similar to Alex's complaint that Jonathan's cowardliness is founded in a world "once-removed." Berenbaum's reference to Wiesel is in fact relevant to both Jonathan and Alex's forms of witnessing. Revisiting the gas chambers at Birkenau, Wiesel asks, "When was this spellbound spot most unreal—in 1944 or today? I look at the watchtowers, the alleyways of the camp, and suddenly, as in a dream, they are filled with people. Once again I am confronting the fearful and faceless creatures of the past; they move in a world apart, a time apart, beyond life and death" (106). While Berenbaum appropriates Wiesel's phrase in order to point to the need to make the story of the Holocaust more manageable and relatable to a wider audience, the original context of the phrase is even more fascinating and revolutionary: For Wiesel, no one was capable of owning the experience of the Holocaust, even those who experienced its brutality firsthand.⁷² Robert Fine posits a similar argument in response to Hannah Arendt's descriptions of the senselessness of the gas chambers, writing, "It is this absence of instrumental or utilitarian rationality which not only gives totalitarian terror in general, and to the Holocaust in particular, its 'horrible originality' but makes it incomprehensible to a social science fixed upon rationalistic ways of thinking" (22). Paired with Wiesel's reaction, Fine suggests that the "horrible originality" of the Holocaust's viciousness is so unreal as to defy comprehension. At the same time, the irrationality that spawned the event cannot be completely contained within this "original" framework if we regard the

⁷² Wiesel's sentiment recalls Theodor Adorno's famous statement that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" ("Cultural" 34), a belief he later revisited in his essay, "After Auschwitz."

present intentionality of the testimonies that have since followed in the Holocaust's wake: The primary role of witness accounts since the Holocaust, embodied most obviously in the quotes and rhetoric emblazoning the walls of Berenbaum's Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C., is to highlight and memorialize these experiences in order to prevent such events from ever happening again.⁷³ Wiesel, Fine, and Berenbaum thus expose the paradox of the Holocaust as an event that exists outside the framework of reality, but that nonetheless should never be copied or recreated.

The grandfather's suicide note at the end of the text exists in a similarly aporetic space. Readers can assume that the grandfather wrote the text, that it represents his own original creation. However, in its metafictional context, readers must also pay attention first to the grandfather's opening acknowledgement of Alex as translator ("If you are reading this, it is because Sasha [i.e., Alex] found it and translated it for you. It means that I am dead, and that Sasha is alive" [274]), second, to Jonathan's lack of response (the suicide note closes the novel), and also to Foer's act of handing off his novel to the grandfather—a man who was actually complicit in a Jewish man's death—in the closing pages. Most significantly, readers must contend with the letter's implied act of plagiarism. The text skillfully encloses these levels of mediation in a note that itself is presented in direct and stark intimacy, the grandfather (via Alex) attempting to express the motivations behind his impending suicide.

⁷³ In fact, the Holocaust Museum's oft-quoted caption for the 20th Anniversary National Tour and Tribute to Holocaust Survivors and World War II Veterans is, quite simply, "Never Again. What You Do Matters." In opposition to this, critics like Zoë Vania Waxman points out that while survivors like Wiesel, Levi, and Anita Lasker-Wallfisch "have accepted this role, the merging of individual experiences of suffering into a collective historical memory both conceals the diversity of experiences it seeks to represent and mediates the writing of testimony" (Waxman 152).

As his final but indirect message to Jonathan, one would assume that, as translator, Alex would present himself and his grandfather in the best light, just as he wished Jonathan would have done with Safran. How then should we regard the confrontational scene between Alex and his father in Jonathan's notebook, now recreated word-for-word in Grandfather's letter?

He told his father that he could care for Mother and Little Igor. It took his saying it to make it true. Finally, he was ready. His father could not believe this thing. What? he asked. What? And Sasha told him again that he would take care of the family, that he would understand if his father had to leave and never return, and that it would not even make him less of a father. He told his father that he would forgive. Oh, his father became so angry, so full of wrath, and he told Sasha that he would kill him, and Sasha told his father that he would kill him, and they moved at each other with violence and his father said, Say it to my face, not to the floor, and Sasha said, You are not my father. (160, 274)

Whether Alex perfectly translates his grandfather's plagiarism or deliberately enacts this plagiarism on his grandfather's behalf is unclear. Nonetheless, that he both translates and sends the letter in the first place, and then lets the act of plagiarism stand, shows that Alex has taken a page from Jonathan's book: In addition to allowing this moment of magical realism to infiltrate the "reality" of Alex's writing, Alex reveals that writing does not always require an allegiance to what he called "faithfulness" in order to enact positive change. Plagiarism becomes Alex's way of collaborating with Jonathan in a work that neither of them may have had initial responsibility in writing. In a way, to paraphrase the pronouncement from Jonathan's notebook, it took Jonathan's writing about Alex's empowerment as a writer, and as a caretaker of his family, to make it true. Alex and

Jonathan's cooperative writing makes the account from Jonathan's notebook both a "not-truth" and a truth "in the actual" at the same time.

Critics like Barthes and Federman complicate the association of ethical or faithful writing with accuracy and originality. Barthes defines a text as "a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture. Similar to Bouvard and Pécuchet, those eternal copyists,"⁷⁴ . . . the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original" (128). Federman might say that he himself "pla(y)giarizes" Barthes when he observes that "the writing of a discourse always implies bringing together pieces of other discourses. . . TO WRITE would be first of all TO QUOTE" (49, 62). These critics destabilize writing and originality to instead show that authorship is a practice that inevitably spans and incorporates a multitude of time periods and cultural and national divisions. Alex's plagiarism is a deliberate attempt to speak to and collaborate with both Jonathan and his grandfather. In a way, Alex encodes a message in this letter that is both *to* Jonathan and written *by* Jonathan, a metafictional self-reflexivity that underlines the inherently and inescapably collaborative nature of all writing.

In fact, the act of plagiarism ironically emphasizes Alex's own authority in writing, in opposition to Jonathan's supposed superiority in his storytelling and handling of the English language. Jonathan enters the text as a full-fledged, self-proclaimed author whereas Alex introduces himself in part by discussing his fallibility with the English language. Nonetheless, the only reason readers know of the account existing in

⁷⁴ Not unlike Akaky Akakievich from Nikolai Gogol's "The Overcoat," Gustave Flaubert's characters Bouvard and Pécuchet from his posthumous *Bouvard et Pécuchet* are copy-clerks, a profession that initially suggests less artistry than labor.

Jonathan's notebook in the first place is because Alex writes about the moment when he read it. While I argue that Alex and Jonathan's story is most effectively read as a collaboration between the two characters, there is also the possibility that Alex wrote much more than ostensibly appears in the novel, even generously attributing the Trachimbrod chapters to Jonathan himself. As Alex suggests at one point during their writing exchange, "perhaps I can continue to aid you as you write more. But not be distressed. I will not require that my name is on the cover. You may pretend that it is only yours" (104). Introducing the biographical author Foer to this scenario further highlights a different kind of collaboration: that between author and characters, as well as author and readers.⁷⁵ If Foer "writes" Jonathan and Alex, this act of plagiarism shows how Alex, in turn, writes, and writes with, Jonathan.

Focusing on these layers of collaboration exposes the interconnection at the heart of what, in Trachimbrod, is identified as the ultimate act of plagiarism. In the town's collaboratively written *Book of Antecedents*, plagiarism is historicized in the context of biblical brothers Cain and Abel. After recounting how Cain killed his brother because of Abel's act of plagiary, the book explains that Cain was punished because "God loves the plagiarist. And so it is written, 'God created humankind in His image, in the image of God He created them.' God is the original plagiarizer. . . . When we plagiarize, we are likewise creating *in the image* and participating in the completion of Creation" (206, emphasis his). Plagiarism is historically regarded "as the most loathsome form of authorship" (Howard 476), the assumption being that "true authorship is incompatible

⁷⁵ Reading for and with the biographical or empirical author is a topic I take up in the penultimate chapter, which discusses Percival Everett and Miguel Syjuco.

with plagiarism because authors are by nature—that is, ancient tradition—not only originary, but sincere, that is, authentic” (Randall 28). After all, Alex has this same expectation for sincere authenticity when he asks Jonathan for “faithful” writing about his grandfather. Nonetheless, the Jewish *Book of Antecedents* defines even God’s creation of humankind as a self-plagiarism, or maybe the first act of plagiarism—an authorship executed by recreating his own likeness in others. Tying the idea of plagiarism to likeness, in fact, opens up our reading of Alex’s (or his grandfather’s) plagiarism to a better understanding of Jonathan and Alex’s interconnectedness. While Alex constantly brings up comparisons between him and Jonathan, these likenesses only form part of the basis for their writing relationship. Alex is certainly pleased and flattered when Jonathan tells him, “It’s funny that you should think that. We must think alike” (60). Nonetheless, Jonathan and Alex’s most productive moments of connection—like Alex’s plea that Jonathan be faithful to his representations of him and his grandfather, or Alex’s mixed emotions after reading Jonathan’s journal—stem from a likeness wrought through dissensus and contestation, rather than a replication of each other’s perspectives.

The novel thus presents Jonathan and Alex’s resemblance not as assimilation, but instead as conversation and shared responsibility. While Barthes, Federman, and others draw attention to the paradox of plagiarism as the supposed theft of words that were never original in the first place, Alex’s plagiarism exposes how even the precise “theft” of someone’s words does not mean that the words are an exact replica of what came before. Through Alex’s appropriation, Jonathan’s plagiarized notes take on new poignancy as the dying words of a regretful husband and father who is unable to forgive

himself for his past actions, and a proud grandfather who sacrifices himself in order to allow his grandson to start life anew.

The same words, then, wear a new face in the hands of a different author, a fact that should be unsurprising given Alex's role as translator, and his and Jonathan's transformation—another kind of translation—through their friendship. Suzy Park, the protagonist of Suki Kim's metafictional novel, *The Interpreter*, echoes the idea of translation as authorship when she observes that truth "comes in different shades, different languages at times. . . an interpreter must translate word for word and yet somehow manipulate the breadth of language to bridge the gap" (16, 91). For Suzy, the intermediaries between one word and its correlations in a different language are numerous; direct "plagiarism" is impossible as language crosses the aporia of meaning, context, and intention. A child of Holocaust survivors, author Eva Hoffman in fact defines both a newness of language and identity as translations. "I have to translate myself," she writes. "But if I'm to achieve this without becoming assimilated—that is, absorbed—by my new world, the translation has to be careful. . . To mouth foreign terms without incorporating their meanings is to risk becoming bowdlerized. A true translation proceeds by the motions of understanding and sympathy" (211). "True" translation, as both Kim's protagonist and Hoffman define it, is a form of interaction that depends on an intimate knowledge of language and speakers, of both self and other.

Translation ultimately forms the foundation of Jonathan and Alex's basis for friendship. Alex realizes that if the Nazis had *not* raided Trachimbrod, Jonathan—like Alex—would have been Ukrainian. While Alex, in true fashion, goes on to joke that

Jonathan “would be a farmer in an unimpressive town, and I live in Odessa, which is very much like Miami” (59), he nonetheless realizes that their differences are an accident of birth. They are in many ways created in each other’s images, interconnected by arbitrary distances of language, religion, and nationality that they have learned to translate in order to write cooperatively. Sharing a joke with Jonathan about the state of his hotel room, Alex muses, “We were like friends. For the first time that I could remember, I felt entirely good” (72). His observation of the two of them being “like friends” mimics the simultaneous distancing and connection enacted in this imprecise translation, this uneasy agreement for plagiarism across the language divide. Alex becomes translated by and through his friendship with Jonathan, and through what he learns of his grandfather’s role in his friend Herschel’s death. In an attempt to free himself from the chains of the language that limits his realization of what his grandfather has done, Alex writes in stream-of-consciousness, a textual representation of the kind of breakdown and disintegration explored by Irene and Sol in the previous chapter, and a textual symptom of what Hoffman, in describing failed translations, suggests might be “cultural schizophrenia” (211). Alex admits, “the truth is that I also pointedatHerschel and I also said heisaJew and I will tell you that you also pointedatHerschel and you also said heisaJew. . . and we all pointateachother so what is it he should have done hewouldhavebeenafooltodoanythingelse but is it forgivable what he did canheeverbeforgiven. . . he is stillguilty I am I am Iam IamI?)” (252). Alex argues that his likenesses to his grandfather and to Jonathan, even as they are wrought in imperfection

and imprecision, are translatable in such a way as to make them all responsible for the tragedies that occurred during the Holocaust.⁷⁶

On one of the walls of the Holocaust Museum, a placard describes the Evian Conference, a 1938 meeting confronting the question of shared connections to and responsibilities for Jewish refugees who, not unlike the fictional Safran, sought sanctuary from the Nazis. While few representatives denied the atrocities occurring in Germany and Austria, and while many spoke emotionally about the horrific nature of the pogroms and even witnessed its devastation, those present were reluctant to accept any more asylum seekers. Myron C. Taylor, the low-level official whom President Roosevelt had sent in his place, pleaded that the Great Depression was already taxing the United States' existing workforce, and thus refused to ease American immigration restrictions. Britain offered similar excuses. In response, Germany observed what it called the "astounding" irony of nations witnessing and then censuring their actions while simultaneously unwilling to step in and help. As it turned out, the likeness and interconnection espoused by the envoys at the conference had a limit. Only one country of the 32 represented at the event stepped forward, offering to take in 100,000 Jewish immigrants and to give them land and assistance. The nation's representative, Virgilio Trujillo Molina, was Rafael Trujillo's brother and the Dominican Republic's emissary. In fact, Allen Wells notes that Trujillo volunteered in part to present a good face to the Americans after his killing of

⁷⁶ An echo of this sentiment appears earlier in Alex's writing when he tells Jonathan, "We are with each other, working on the same story, and I am certain that you can also feel it. Do you know that I am the Gypsy girl and you are Safran, and that I am Kolker and you are Brod, and that I am your grandmother and you are Grandfather, and that I am Alex and you are you, and that I am you and you are me? Do you not comprehend that we can bring each other safety and peace?" (214)

Haitians in what became known in the Parsley Massacre,⁷⁷ and also because, like the Nazis, he bought into a similar idea of Aryanism—a whitening of the Dominican race that would have left out dark-skinned Dominicans like Oscar and Lola (Wells xxii, Kaplan 26). While the Roosevelt administration was certainly aware of this hypocrisy, Wells nonetheless describes Evian as Trujillo’s “gift-wrapped opportunity to redeem himself” (11). Yunior might say that Trujillo’s assistance of Jewish immigrants was his failed attempt at a *zafa*, his own counterspell for atrocities he committed against the Haitians and his own people.

Just as God’s “original” act of plagiarism as described in Jonathan’s fictionalized *Book of Antecedents* draws attention to the idea of otherness as likeness, Jonathan and Alex, and Yunior and Oscar, (not to mention Erdrich’s Irene and Gil, or Apostol’s Sol and Soli) reveal this presumed act of creation as shared responsibilities of authorship. After all, in Jonathan’s account, God appears to plagiarize himself in part merely to provide himself with witnesses to his subsequent acts of plagiarism. If we are just copies of each other with no authentic original, then the distinctions that divide us are themselves illusory. In his *Mimesis and Alterity*, Michael Taussig writes, “To declare that writing itself is a mimetic exchange with the world also means that it involves the relatively unexplored but everyday capacity to imagine, if not become, Other” (x-xi). These subversive acts of writing and witnessing are unfaithful thefts only if we are unwilling to acknowledge the otherness within us, the ability to connect across multiple

⁷⁷ For more on Trujillo’s 1937 genocide of Haitians known as the Parsley Massacre (called *Kouto-a* in Haiti), see Sprague and Turits, as well as Rita Dove’s poem, “Parsley.”

linguistic and national divides and even—as Alex and Yunion learn—beyond our own expectations of faithfulness, truth, and authenticity.

CHAPTER IV
“ENLIGHTENED BY ALL MYRIAD THINGS”:
MATERIAL METAFICTION IN NICOLE KRAUSS’S *GREAT HOUSE* AND RUTH
OZEKI’S *A TALE FOR THE TIME BEING*

Toward the end of Foer’s *Everything is Illuminated*, the writer-protagonists Alex and Jonathan are disappointed to discover that the woman living in what was once the village of Trachimbrod is not Augustine, the woman they had been seeking, but a fellow Trachimbroder named Lista. In actuality, Lista and the numerous items she keeps boxed in her house are all that have survived after the village was bombed by the Nazis during World War II. Lining the walls of her home, Lista’s haphazardly labeled boxes contain not only fragments from Trachimbrod, but also mementos she has salvaged from its remains. Opening one of these boxes, she shows Alex and Jonathan a wedding ring that her friend had buried underground before the Nazis arrived. The friend told Lista of the ring’s location “just in case” (192). Jonathan reveals a common understanding of human’s relations to objects, musing that her friend may have told her the location so “that there would be proof that she existed. . . Evidence. Documentation. Testimony. . . Every time you see it, you think of her” (192). Lista, however, disagrees. She offers, in effect, that her friend told her “in case someone should come searching one day. . . The ring,” she emphasizes, “does not exist for you. You exist for the ring. The ring is not in case of you. You are in case of the ring” (192). Thus, Lista inverts conventional

perceptions of objects as subservient to our desires, as markers that only confirm and uphold our existing knowledge, history, and understanding of identity. In place of this assumption, she asserts that objects that allow us to create meaning, what Bruno Latour refers to as “non-human actants” or agents (66), can unlock the memories of others and redefine how we see ourselves.

In this way, Lista’s stacks of boxes resemble what may lie hidden in the back rooms of museum galleries. In fact, her chaotic filing system, which includes, for example, a box tagged as “REMAINS” that contains combs, rings, flowers, and ribbons (Foer 151) can give us insight into the various impositions that liberal multiculturalism makes upon identity relating to objects and objectification. To wit, Lista posits that these remains have an order that cannot be captured by the objects’ intended or conventional functions; they are therefore instrumental as evidence, documentation, and testimony, but not as Jonathan believes them to be. Nicole Krauss’s *Great House* and Ruth Ozeki’s *A Tale for the Time Being* allows us to further discern how connecting with and through objects opens up a dynamic understanding of ethnic identity. Despite Latour’s accurate assertion that “the tracing of social connections [becomes] especially tricky once you begin to add non-humans to the list of *bona fide* social ties” (77), I maintain that these texts present non-human metafictional agents as producing and enhancing transethnic identifications in the human protagonists.⁸³ The lost village of Trachimbrod, now existing

⁸³ Notably, while Latour believes that groupings like “ethnicity” have been harmful in limiting and dictating the scope of sociological research (29), his idea of actor-network theory (ANT), which describes the collective interactions of human and non-human actors, shares similarities with transethnicity’s focus on close and intimate associations in defining identity. Like transethnicity, ANT is interested in “tell[ing] stories about ‘how’ relations assemble or don’t” (Law 141) and in reframing these stories from non-dominant perspectives. Latour is part of a group of critical theorists including, most notably, Bill Brown,

only in Lista's stored objects, represents an important theme in Krauss and Ozeki's novels—that of the unstable significance that place and memory hold in the lives of its author-characters. This chapter extends the notions of witnessing and testimony discussed in the previous chapter by focusing on how objects force us to consider ethnic identity beyond a sense of exceptionalism—that is, the conviction that one possesses an extraordinary quality in comparison to others—and nationalism, which is the belief that one's nation exhibits unique and unusually remarkable characteristics that set it above other nations.⁸⁴ More specifically, objects allow us to examine how belonging can manifest itself transethnically, through intimate connections that compound the national bonds celebrated in American multiculturalism. As I will show, Krauss and Ozeki's characters are empowered by objects in productive ways that challenge the United States' glorification of the autonomous, unique and exceptional ethnic subject whose distinctiveness is meant to uphold and honor national identity. The objects force the writer-protagonists to rethink their connection to others and to mobilize their authorship to complicate the veneration of one's home country as a mode of ethnic self-expression, instead pursuing intimate connections that transcend national borders as well as, more significantly, divisions between storyworlds and personal borders. In turn, the objects allow the protagonists to redefine themselves in relationship to others and to experience

who practice variations on "thing theory," which looks at the role that things play in the formation of our cultures, beliefs, and identity. See, for example, Brown's "Thing Theory" and Latour's *Reassembling the Social*, the latter of which details ANT and the ways the methodology can redefine sociological approaches to our understanding of groups and culture. The work of some theorists such as Andrea Quinlan and John K. Young are useful as companions to Latour's theories, as they have sought to more closely rectify ANT with fields like feminism, postcolonial theory, and ethnic and literary studies.

⁸⁴ Throughout this dissertation, I adopt the *OED* differentiations between nationalism—the defense or promotion of a country especially in comparison to other nations—and nationality, which refers more generically to the state of being a citizen or subject of a particular country. For an extensive history and theorization of nationalism, see Anthony D. Smith.

memories that can be collectively shared and passed on. Like the sand tray in Amy Tan's *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, the cards in Mario Alberto Zambrano's *Lotería*, or even the unwritten book in Canadian Haitian author Dany Laferrière's *I am a Japanese Writer*, the objects in *Great House* and *A Tale for the Time Being* inspire intersubjectivity; Krauss's writing table and Ozeki's watch, diary, journal, lunchbox, letters, and glasses underscore acts of creation that invoke transethnic moments of connection.

Analyzing Nicole Krauss's *Great House*, the first part of this chapter centers its argument on the desk that prompts many of the events and the stories that are told in the course of the novel. Characters such as the writer Nadia and antiques dealer George insist upon their remarkable and unique qualities and initially defend the isolation that has accompanied the preservation of their exceptional talents. The chapter's first section explores not only objects, but also objectification in the form of instrumentality. Initially, characters such as Nadia appear useful to no one. However, I would argue that placing the writing table at the center of the narrative shifts the narrative, propelling characters toward a transethnic understanding of identity that depends on instrumental connections to others rather than on an exceptional presentation of the self. Shifting the power from objectification to the objects themselves allows us to see how these items act as occasions for transethnic self-fashioning. By redefining their usefulness in pursuit of intimate and personal relationships with both human and non-human agents, these characters overcome their sense of exceptionalism to traverse literal and figurative boundaries.

In the second part of this chapter, I consider the objects that inspire the narratives of Ruth Ozeki's novel, *A Tale for the Time Being*. These items, which the fictional

character Ruth finds washed up on a beach, prompt a critique of national identity and implicitly of the conflation between nationality and ethnicity known as ethnonationality, while also opening up the possibility of intimate connections via the crossing of borders and its metafictional equivalent, that is, the crossing of storyworlds known as metalepsis. The writerly artifacts at the center of these two texts further reveal how metafiction as a genre can be more than simply narcissistic navel-gazing or even a mere postmodern diversion. Rather, Krauss's focus on the desk as protagonist, as well as Ozeki's exploration of Buddhist interconnections between humans and things, allows us to see ethnic American metafiction as mobile, multi-layered, and vibrant.

While this chapter will focus on how objects can complicate celebrations of exceptional ethnic performance as a form of valorizing certain American ideals, it is first necessary to track the U.S.'s historic relationships with objects, objectification, and identity. In fact, many critics have lamented multiculturalism's reduction of certain ethnic subjects to the level of object, with humans relegated to do the representational, documentary, and testimonial work that Foer's Jonathan demanded of things like the buried wedding ring.⁸⁵ For instance, reading Chicago's Indo-American Heritage Museum

⁸⁵ An early example in this history of ethnic objectification appears in Nella Larsen's 1928 novel *Quicksand*. The protagonist Helga Crane poses for a portrait that places her in an objectified state similar to that of Erdrich's Irene. However, even before the portrait sitting, Helga already feels that her ethnic and national identities set her apart in the city around her, making her an exotic oddity. The painter accompanies Helga on a shopping excursion in Copenhagen, the narrator noting that the trip "conveyed to Helga her exact status in her new environment. A decoration. A curio. A peacock. Their progress through the shops was an event. . . Her dark, alien appearance was to most people an astonishment. Some stared surreptitiously, some openly, and some stopped dead in front of her" (Larsen 67). It is intriguing that, while demoralizing to Helga, the narrator's description of Helga's objectification does not reveal any ostensible marks of oppression. Instead, like those in Rudrappa and Lowe's examples of celebratory multiculturalism to follow, Helga is regarded with the "exalted attention" of someone who inspires wonder. Notably, Helga herself never volunteers to pose for the portrait; Herr Olsen decides to paint her without ever speaking to her directly, relegating her to the role of "a curiosity, a stunt, at which people came and gazed" (Larsen 66).

as a multicultural text, sociologist Sharmila Rudrappa laments the way that the museum's Indian immigrant women workers have objectified themselves in order to "represent" their culture to others. Rudrappa realizes that the female guides actively participate in a "public presentation of the racial self" that hinges on "converting themselves into *ethnic objects*" (113, emphasis mine).⁸⁶ Similar to *Shadow Tag*'s Gil peddling his paintings of Irene (and thus, Irene herself) to white buyers, the Center's guides have deliberately clothed and accessorized themselves in "racially signified" ways to act as multicultural emissaries for their tourist visitors, implying a "frozen, museum-like quality. . . instead of conveying a sense of a constantly changing, dynamic culture" (Rudrappa 113, 114). The women, Rudrappa observes, thus adorn themselves to uphold a sense of wonder in specific aspects of Indian national culture, an amazement that Stephen Greenblatt defines as "the power of the displayed object to stop the viewer in his or her tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention" (42). Such wonder sustains the image of exceptional or unique ethnic representatives who are entitled to generously share and adapt their cultures to appeal to American outsiders. At the same time, this sense of wonder alienates the spectators who are not privy to such "authentic" performances of ethnic identity. This is precisely what occurs when Rudrappa, in

Paired with Helga's objectification is a lack of control over her body and the way it is regarded and presented. She is skirted around the city, compelled to sit for a portrait, and treated as a rare work of art.

⁸⁶ The women that Rudrappa describes promote what Graham Huggan calls the "alterity industry" (12). Huggan describes the alterity industry as a commercialized exploitation of diversity and cultural difference that markets itself primarily to the West. While he discusses this industry primarily in the context of postcolonial literature (earlier Rushdie texts constitute his favorite examples), Huggan further associates the industry with "the massification of exotic merchandise—to the range of tawdry 'ethnic' goods which, filtering through global channels, eventually land in a shop or shopping mall or street market near you" (68). He also includes cultural tours and celebrations in this industry. Via Rudrappa, I suggest that the women at the Center make themselves over into objectual members of the alterity industry. For other examples of this phenomenon, see Timothy Brennan and Anthony Appiah.

comparison to the ornamented Brahmanic Hindu women at the Center, looks down at her jeans and hiking boots and wonders, “Do I feel inauthentic because I am a woman but am not clothed in racially signifying clothes?” (113). The awe that these exceptional women invoke valorizes United States multicultural ideals in a way that then gets subsumed into American ethnicity. As such, the wonderment they inspire serves to privilege an exceptional performance of Indian nationality as a “true” or “authentic” picture of Indian Americanness.⁸⁷

In fact, the exalted attention that the women invoke as ethnic objects is not unlike the championing of tolerance and celebration of diverse cultures that continues to sanction much of American multiculturalism since its heyday in the 1980s and 1990s. This practice is particularly true among those of the model minority, typically Jewish American and Asian American groups held up as paradigms of successful national assimilation.⁸⁸ For example, in the context of a 1990 Los Angeles diversity festival, Lisa

⁸⁷ The privileging of exceptional ethnic representations echoes the observation that Theodore R. Johnson (cited in the previous chapter) makes in regards to Black History Month’s veneration for “extraordinary human beings—legends whose anomalous stories don’t neatly translate to everyday interracial encounters.” The difference here is Rudrappa’s emphasis on the women’s self-objectification of themselves and their ethnic identity specifically with the purpose of upholding an American identity that honors but then relegates this objectified performance to the background.

⁸⁸ In the United States, the model minority stereotype was first applied to Jews in the 1940s, when rabbis took a cue from President Roosevelt and translated and recycled religious language to fit the existing rhetoric of “authentic” Americanness. As Lila Corwin Berman observes, “[f]itting Jews into emerging models of the American minority group, Jewish leaders were able to explain Jewishness in terms familiar to Americans and indispensable to the functioning of democracy” (73). From this point forward, certain members of the Jewish community experimented with assimilation to maintain and ultimately supersede this model minority stereotype, achieved in part through presenting the Jewish ethnic group as “useful” in endorsing American principles, and thus evoking Nussbaum’s ideas of instrumentality (Berman 42, 72; Nussbaum 257). In this case, many outspoken members claiming Jewish ethnicity objectified themselves—that is, they advertised their own usefulness as a model minority in order to attain equality through assimilation. While we cannot presume full equality for Jewish Americans, the method has become so effective that Andrew Furman contends that Jewish writers are now in a “double bind” in that scholars “have ceased to consider them multicultural or minority writers at all” (3).

Lowe explains, “Multiculturalism levels the important differences and contradictions within and among racial and ethnic minority groups according to the discourse of pluralism, which asserts that American culture is a democratic terrain to which every variety of constituency has equal access and in which all are represented” (87). Akin to the Indo-American Center guides, the L.A. festival’s performers—including Kun Opera singers, Maori dancers, and Ecuadorian musicians—thus situate themselves as ethnic objects—objectified model minorities meant to invoke wonder as they perform their nationalities within the contained, controlled space of an ethnic American celebration. In fact, these exceptional performers are isolated even from fellow members of the model minority they are meant to represent. Such ethnic objects have tasked themselves to “present the city as an aestheticized utopia of third world artists” (Lowe 86), and may be subsequently espoused “as evidence of a color-blind democracy” (Sohn 7). They ostensibly celebrate the democratic equality that allows for these specific forms of

More recently, the term “model minority” has become widely synonymous with Asian Americans, to the point where the group is sometimes referred to—not unproblematically—as the “New Jews.” Sharing an early American history somewhat similar to that of Jewish Americans, Asian Americans were initially excluded from American membership. In her study focusing on Chinese and Japanese Americans, Ellen Wu points out that the exceptionalized portrayal of Asian Americans began during WWII, when the United States began to distance its ideals from that of Communism specifically by promoting U.S. racial broadmindedness and the ability for Asian Americans to act “like white Americans [especially in terms of economic success and lawful behavior] while remaining racially distinct from them” (Wu 4). Such assumptions of success and exceptionalism for both Jewish and Asian Americans cover over any material issues of inequality, while at the same time disempowering the very groups that the term “model minority” is meant to uplift. For example, a 2012 Pew Research Center report on The Rise of Asian Americans brought the controversy of Asian Americans’ attainment of the American dream to the national stage, extending the concept of the model minority into contemporary times. Pundits and politicians triumphantly declared that Asian Americans, in statistically higher numbers than the rest of their American counterparts, consistently believed the American Dream to be more attainable, and still within reach. Joie Chen publicly denied the findings, stating, “In the advocacy world, those who don’t seem to need, don’t get” (n.p.). In other words, one cannot help a population that is not perceived as needing it. As Stephen Sohn points out, the model minority narrative transforms the Asian American ethnic group into “a docile minority, one who does not protest and instead obeys the formulation that he or she models for others to follow” (11). In this way, these performances of the model minority become a way to celebrate the contained and objectified other, displaying an aesthetically pleasing form of cultural expression validated by schools, businesses, and the media.

racially-marked self-expression to take place in the United States but do so within the confines of these festive modes. Such wondrous commemorations are the epitome of multicultural principles: Diversity is embraced even as it is used to advocate national ideals, the performers acting as representatives of non-American nationalities while also promoting multiculturalism as a form of tolerant American progressiveness.

Rudrappa and Lowe thus access a long history of oppressive objectification associated with ethnic identity parading under the guise of open-minded national standards. However, their examples suggest that the problem lies not solely with objectification, but rather with how objectification is mobilized to demean and exclude others. In fact, most of the criticism surrounding the idea of human objectification—whether it is in ethnic and cultural studies, feminist and queer studies, or sociology—relates this framework of thinking to oppression and silencing. The wording in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is typical, defining objectification as the “demotion or degrading of a person or class of people (especially women) to the status of a mere object.” The definition implies that, first, objects are intrinsically separate from humans primarily because of what Kant identifies as humanity’s “inner worth” or “dignity” (42), and second, humans are made to lose this dignity, to be demoted and degraded, in the wake of objectification.

The shift in the terms of objectification from this more common demoralizing version to Lowe and Rudrappa’s examples of celebratory ethnic objects actually mimics what activist Tim Wise identifies as the shift from Racism 1.0 to Racism 2.0, the latter being the kind of prejudice that allows people to “cling to racist stereotypes about people

of color generally, while nonetheless carving out exceptions for those who. . . make us comfortable by seeming so ‘different’ from what we view as a much less desirable norm” (Wise 15).⁸⁹ What we might call “Objectification 2.0,” then, parades the ethnic object under the guise of multiculturalism as if he or she were choosing objectification from among a series of other equally agreeable and accepted choices, rather than being made into an object through prejudice. Such “choices” alienate those like Rudrappa, who is ashamed of her sweater and jeans. Objectification separates the performers from the spectators, ironically isolating the women in costume as the Indo-American Center’s “true” and “authentic” ambassadors of their ethnic group. They are situated as the pinnacle of representation—exceptional models within the model minority, meant to teach other members of the ethnic group how to properly perform their ethnicity and nationality. These performances, then, do not benefit people like Rudrappa, but sustain and valorize multicultural subjects who are perceived as harmless to the American national framework. Significantly, the performers are not completely to blame here, since there is a dearth of viable choices that these performers have for ethnic self-expression within the nation-state. This lack of access and choice has everything to do with the way that certain exceptional ethnic performances are exploited as examples of American diversity and tolerance, held up as instances of a post-racial equality that has yet to develop. As Mae M. Ngai notes, focusing on national (as opposed to transnational) identity endorses “the privileged position of the Western, liberal subject and occludes the role of non-Western people as historical subjects in their own right” (60).

⁸⁹ In the microaggressions project discussed in the conclusion, such a sentiment is often phrased in a positive, seemingly well-meaning way, as in “Well, you don’t *act* black.”

Channeling Foucault's *The Order of Things* to point out such moments of isolation and exclusion, Rey Chow claims that the concept of "Man" springs from the binary that "some humans have been cast as objects, while other humans have been given the privilege of becoming subjects" (2). While the criteria by which persons are counted as "Man" or "subject" have certainly and deservedly become more inclusive, objectification 2.0 still leaves out those relegated to inauthenticity, dehumanized object-ness, or even what Kenneth Warren refers to as being "run-of-the-mill" (21). As Chow puts it, "the concept of 'Man' or 'humanity' itself is fragmented precisely by its enthusiastic enforcement" (Chow 4), by the need to define man in a non-objectual way.⁹⁰ To further qualify the arguments stated above, then, this chapter examines Krauss and Ozeki's texts in light of their responses to Objectification 2.0, revealing how objectification and objects in general can complicate these enforced separations between human and object, thus calling for a critical reassessment of multiculturalism's focus on national and exceptional ideals as attributes of ethnic identity. The objects upon which Krauss and Ozeki's novels center—the well-traveled, many-drawer desk for Krauss,

⁹⁰ In his *The Democracy of Objects*, Levi Bryant provides, via his concept of ontological realism (18), a possible response to Chow and Foucault's formations of Man as an invention to represent objectification. Bryant is part of a philosophical movement known as object-oriented ontology (or OOO) that, to put it simply, centers our understanding of the world on the object-ness of objects. This movement includes works like Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2010), Ian Bogost's *Alien Phenomenology, or What It's Like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 2012), and Timothy Morton's *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 2013). Part of Bryant's intervention (which he calls onticology) attempts a "redrawing of distinctions and a decentering of the human. . . [In other words,] there is only one type of being: objects. As a consequence, humans are not excluded, but are rather objects among the various types of objects that exist or populate the world, each with their own specific powers and capacities" (Bryant 20). Certain philosophers have critiqued OOO for not adequately accounting for issues like anti-racist politics. See, for example, Sara Ahmed in her *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2006) as well as her less formal but more pointed responses to Ian Bogost on Bryant's blog *Larval Subjects*, particularly the 2012 post entitled "War Machines and Military Logistics: Some Cards on the Table."

and a number of historical and writerly objects for Ozeki—show that ethnic identity does not have to hinge on national identification or on exceptional and controlled performances of domestic ethnicity that are meant to maintain such nationalism. In fact, the texts uncover how these emphases can be damaging and isolating in comparison to the small and personal connections fostered and inspired by the writerly objects. The associations that the characters make are often accessed through a particular feature of objectification: Martha Nussbaum lists usefulness or “instrumentality” at the top of a list of aspects marking objectification, noting that in such cases, the “objectifier treats the object as a tool of his or her purposes” (257). By using others and by allowing themselves to in turn become vessels for the purpose of forming personal relationships, many characters in Krauss and Ozeki’s novels are able to overcome their own perceived exceptionalism, and even to traverse borders—national, theoretical, and otherwise—in order to strengthen these connections.

In a 2010 article in *The Guardian*, Slavoj Žižek echoes the ideas behind Racism 2.0 and Objectification 2.0 by positing that “multicultural tolerance and respect of differences share with those who oppose immigration the need to keep others at a proper distance. . . today’s tolerant liberal multiculturalism [upholds] an experience of the Other deprived of its Otherness—the decaffeinated Other.”⁹¹ The objectification adopted by the

⁹¹ It should be noted that Žižek draws out the idea of what is considered “caffeinated” or not to extremes that are not dealt with this chapter; for instance, he opens up questions of toleration for what George Crowder would call “illiberal” values such as racism and hatred. (For more on the complicated divides concerning toleration and personal autonomy, see Crowder, particularly his discussion of Will Kymlicka’s debate debates with Chandran Kukathas and John Rawls [52-58]). Rather, I deal with the nuances of a liberal multiculturalism that values above all what Žižek refers to as “the right not to be harassed, which is the right to be kept at a safe distance from others.” While the previous chapter sought to expand this notion beyond ghettoized cultural expressions like the diversity festival to include transgressive forms of

multicultural performers in Rudrappa and Lowe's examples promote this idea of the decaffeinated other by exclusively celebrating the more widely palatable qualities of the ethnic representations they embody, and by silencing other representations that do not uphold a specific vision of American tolerance and diversity. The entertainers in Lowe and Rudrappa's examples notably shed these objectified and decaffeinated performances once they leave these demarcated celebratory spaces, finally returning to their "normal" lives as Americans. Lowe and Rudrappa's examples are especially revealing because multiculturalism endorses and celebrates these heightened performances of ethnicity as "authentic." Similarly, speaking in the context of sexual identity, Judith Butler questions the justification for certain professionalized or managed performances of identity. On the eve of speaking at a conference on homosexuality, Butler told her friends "that I was off to Yale to be a lesbian, which of course didn't mean that I wasn't one before, but that somehow then, as I spoke in that context, I was one in some more thorough and totalizing way, at least for the time being" (358). Butler posits that some might characterize this overtly qualified and structured performance of sexuality as vital in the face of the potential destruction of queer identity. In response, she asks, "ought such threats of obliteration dictate the terms of the political resistance to them, and if they do, do such homophobic efforts to that extent win the battle from the start?" (359). Multicultural performers of ethnicity, particularly those deemed part of the model minority ("I'm going to the Indo-American Heritage Museum to be Indian American"), similarly allow others

storytelling, this chapter highlights objectual modes of connection that circumvent (or allow circumventions of) these restrictive forms of isolation.

to dictate their political resistance and ethnic identity, thus reiterating this objectification and isolation by presenting their bodies as exceptional examples of American liberalism.

The texts in this chapter center around fictional acts of writing as well as metafictional objects—that is, objects within the narrative that expose other aspects of the text itself—in order to draw attention to the problems behind the United States’ espousal of pointed performances of the model minority. These texts respond to Objectification 2.0 by complicating the exceptionalism of such model representations and by focusing on one-on-one connections in order to define ethnic identity, thus eschewing extraordinary performances that in turn act as symbols of unity and national ideals. In fact, the connections that Krauss and Ozeki’s characters make require international travel, in either the literal or metafictionally figurative sense, a negotiation of multiple borders in relation to, or as a result of, their writing and their writerly interaction with these objects. Thus, while I focus on characters who might identify demographically with ethnic groups who have been traditionally regarded as model minorities—specifically Jewish American and Asian American groups—what is more significant is how these protagonists approach writing and writerly objects by responding to Objectification 2.0, showing the highlighting of exceptional performances of ethnicity and national identity as isolating and counterproductive modes of self-expression, and instead reframing ethnic identity via transnational and yet highly intimate scales of human connection.

The Temple in Another Form: Nicole Krauss's Traveling Desk in *Great House*

Objects are not without spirit. As living things they touch us in
unimagined ways.
--bell hooks, "An Aesthetic of Blackness"

Krauss's *Great House* contains four main storylines, all of which are connected through a writing table rumored to have barely escaped Nazi destruction during WWII (Valerie Sayers very cleverly refers to the novel as a "desk set" [27]). The novel opens with the writer Nadia narrating her story—her talambuhay, in a sense—about her willful alienation as a writer and how that relates to her table. She speaks in part to a man in a coma whom she addresses as "Your Honor," explaining the reason why she has left New York for Jerusalem, as well as the background of the accident that caused his hospitalization. The end of the novel reveals that man to be a writer-turned-judge named Dovik, whom his father Aaron addresses in his mind in the novel's second storyline. A third plot thread, narrated by an elderly man named Arthur Bender, explores his relationship with his now-deceased wife, a novelist named Lotte who owned the desk before Nadia, giving it to a Chilean-Jewish poet named Daniel Varsky. Narrating the final plotline, Isabel stops writing her thesis in order to take up with the peripatetic Weisz family—her boyfriend Yoav, his sister Leah, and their father George, a mysterious man whose job is to work for Jewish families recovering objects looted by the Nazis. George is obsessed with unearthing his family's own objects, and in recreating his father's study, particularly the massive table that filled the room before Nazi occupation forced his family to part with their belongings.

While the narrators' relationships to this central object differ, their varying perspectives on the writing table and its massive presence uncover much about their own sense of identity. Nadia relates how, "over the course of two and a half decades I'd physically grown around [the desk], my posture formed by years of leaning over it and fitting myself to it" (17). Nadia thus describes a bodily transformation in connection to this object, one that mirrors her own emotional turmoil and isolation in relation to what she believes to be her exceptional writing identity. After Daniel's mysterious death in Chile, presumably at the hands of Pinochet's secret police, Leah Weisz shows up to claim the table from Nadia, purporting to be Daniel's daughter. Nadia is torn between her lifelong feelings as a guardian of the desk and her own sense of entitlement as its keeper. She is further put off by Leah's appraiser-like regard for the table, as if it were a mere object. Nadia confesses to her comatose listener, "I found myself struggling to accept the idea that I was about to hand over the single meaningful object in my life as a writer, the lone physical representation of all that was otherwise weightless and intangible, to this waif who might sit at it from time to time as if at a paternal altar. And yet, Your Honor, what could I do?" (23) Because Nadia has caused the very accident leading to Dovik lying in the hospital bed before her, she feels obliged to tell and then revise her story, explaining her desperate attempt to follow the writing table all the way to Jerusalem. Nadia comes to realize that her relationship with this one thing represents all that she has written and all she has given up because of her writing—including her marriage and other human connections. She has built her life's purpose around her exceptional identity as a writer. Just as Boyet uses his shorn sleeves in Alex Gilvarry's novel *Memoirs* to

authorize his individuality and to set himself apart from those around him, Nadia has used the desk to justify her self-imposed segregation. Through retelling her story to Dovik in light of this presumed exceptionalism, Nadia is forced to question the isolation that she has justified on behalf of her perceived uniqueness as a writer.

Other characters in the novel describe similarly intricate affiliations to the desk and the way the object has reframed their human relationships. Arthur perceives it as “bullying the other pathetic bits of furniture” in his wife Lotte’s office (83). Rather than “some homely, unassuming article of work or domesticity,” the thing was “like a Venus flytrap, ready to pounce on them and digest them via one of its many little terrible drawers. . . Sometimes I would roll over in the dark to face a sleeping Lotte: Either he goes or I do, I imagined saying” (248-9). For Arthur, the desk represents Lotte’s jealously guarded secrecy about her past, particularly of her time in a transit camp for Jews with her parents, as a chaperone for Jewish children on a Kindertransport, and—most significantly—as mother of a child she furtively gives away before she and Arthur meet. Meanwhile, in the fourth storyline, Isabel learns that the writing table holds an even more precarious role in the lives of the Weisz family. She realizes that even as George Weisz has carted his two children all around the world in masterful pursuit of items lost by Jewish families to the Nazi pogroms, he himself is haunted by his inability to recreate his father’s ravaged office. In each storyline, the desk manipulates the characters’ actions and behaviors, the object holding the role of subject and agent in the novel. While multiculturalism’s Objectification 2.0 endorses certain forms of ethnicity as more extraordinary and representative than others, the experiences Nadia and her counterparts

have in relation to the enigmatic desk reveal the volatility of such limited celebrations of diversity. The object exposes the characters' alienation from others, particularly from the unattainable Jewish ideal that haunts their perception of themselves and their belief in an isolated self-possession, the ideal image of a writer but also of an ethnic Jew who Nadia believes to be possessed of an "exquisite understanding" (206) and who Dovik's father describes as having "investigated, held forth, aired his opinion, argued, gone on and on to numbing lengths, sucked every last scrap off the bone of every question" (175).⁹² Like Rudrappa, who compares her "black sweater that had seen better days" to the "beautiful silk sari" (109) worn by one of the Hindu women at the center, the characters in Krauss's novel feel estranged from the image that multiculturalism upholds as an exceptional model of Jewishness, a model within the model minority.

Krauss's novel thematizes these exceptions in the form of the writing self. How this writerly exceptionalism relates to Nadia's identity as a Jewish American becomes clear once we explore her perspective on authorship and tie it to the item haunting the novel's pages. Nadia describes her extraordinary qualities as an author by explaining how she came to see herself as "chosen, not protected so much as made an exception of, imbued with a gift that kept me whole but was nothing more than a potential until the day came that I would make something of it. . . . this belief transformed itself into law, and the law came to govern my life." She continues, "In so many words, Your Honor, this is the story of how I became a writer" (201). For Nadia, then, her foremost identity is not as

⁹² Characters in *Great House* also allude to the stereotype of Jews as extraordinarily long-suffering. As a young man who fancied himself an author, Dovik wrote a novel featuring a "shark that takes the brunt of human emotions" (65, 179). Contemplating his son's creation, Aaron remarks, "The Jews have been living in alienation for thousands of years. For modern man it's a hobby. What can you learn from those books that you weren't born knowing already?" (68).

a woman, an American Jew, or even as a New Yorker, but as an author. She comes to realize that she herself created this perception of an exceptional author in order to excuse her inability to maintain any commitments beyond that of her writing; being an exemplary writer required adopting what she described as an “a priori unwillingness to oblige” (15). While we may interpret her self-alienation as a response to her inability or refusal to assimilate, we can also describe her being “made an exception of” as a defense mechanism against a self-image she cannot attain.

The sheer weighty presence of Daniel’s desk in her cramped apartment reveals the instability of her self-enforced exceptionalism, compelling her to renegotiate her complex ethnic identity in light of the object that dominates her apartment. She is forced to question whether her sense of duty and instrumentality as a writer were borne not out of a superior performance of writerly abilities, but rather out of her own discomfort with human connection. This realization hits her when she feels that the poet Daniel’s very spirit haunts the desk. Upon learning of Daniel’s disappearance “among the martyred poets silenced by Pinochet” (14), Nadia realizes that the object was telling her “that I was only an accidental caretaker who had foolishly imagined that she possessed something, an almost magical quality, which, in fact, she’d never had” (204). She realized that she had deliberately taken on this belief in her extraordinariness, that it was not something innate or essential. Instead, she had “put [her]self into storage” as though she herself were a mere object (211). The weight of Daniel’s ghost as it “haunts the desk,” combined with the threat of Dovik’s death as he lies in a coma beside her, forces Nadia to contend with her justifications for self-imposed isolation. In fact, feeling compelled to begin with why

she was in Jerusalem in the first place, Nadia actually revises the story of her writerly origins—and her own identity in the process—to revolve around the writing object and her fleeting relationship with Daniel.

Despite Nadia's change in attitude while talking candidly to a stranger who may or may not hear her, we cannot completely characterize her realization as humbling, in the sense of Nadia being "brought down" to the level of the lowly thing. Alternatively, the desk symbolizes a part of her identity that, like Daniel's ghost, she fears may be too far gone to retrieve. She tells her comatose listener, "The life I had chosen, a life largely absent of others, certainly emptied of the ties that keep most people tangled up in each other, only made sense when I was actually writing the sort of work I had sequestered myself in order to produce" (43). Her relationship to the writing table inspires a question that hits her "with a shock of nausea [as] it surfaced at last: *What if I had been wrong?*" (200). Her pursuit of the object after Leah takes it away prompts her to doubt the foundation of her lifelong alienation, to wonder if she adopted a false identity at the expense of personal relationships. It is not surprising that Nadia's descriptions of her singular qualities resemble a type of objectification, in which she eschews involvement with others in order to make herself an instrument through which words emerge on the page. The way that Nadia redirects this objectification is the lesson that the comatose Dovik—himself a vessel for Nadia's storytelling—teaches her.

In fact, Dovik is not the only silent partner to Nadia's eventual alteration of her identity. In order to further unlock the depths of Nadia's objectification, Krauss demands that her readers approach her text in a metafictional way that resembles transethnicity. In

other words, she asks readers to read cross-textually, through and across the various stories, seeing how they interact with and speak to each other and how the desk itself weaves the novel's threads together in unexpected ways to make an argument for ethnicity as not limited to its most exceptional representations. Thus, the companion to Nadia's insight into her extraordinary abilities lies with George Weisz and Arthur Bender, whose own seemingly disparate stories finally intersect toward the novel's end, culminating in a startlingly personal connection between two very reclusive characters. In his own pursuit, Weisz learns that the writing table belonged to Arthur's wife, Lotte, who has since passed away, leaving Arthur helpless to retrieve her unknowable past. Sensing the item he seeks is gone, Weisz tells Arthur the story of a first-century rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai. Learning that Jerusalem was burned, the Temple destroyed, and the Jews sent into exile, ben Zakkai is understandably devastated, wondering, "What is a Jew without Jerusalem? How can you be a Jew without a nation? How can you make a sacrifice to God if you don't know where to find him?" (278). Significantly, ben Zakkai wants to know how one can have an ethnicity and a religion without a nation, and an identity without a home.⁹³ Ben Zakkai's response to these questions becomes apparent only after a life of work and dedication in which he leads his students in recording centuries of oral law in what becomes the Talmud. Weisz notes that it is this act of collaborative writing that brings ben Zakkai's solution to light:

⁹³ As mentioned earlier in this project, while I recognize that there are certainly manifold formulations for any identity, my primary concern for this study involves ethnic and authorial, rather than religious, identity. Both Krauss and Ozeki complicate the false divide between these distinctions, and I fully recognize that identity is an assemblage of multiple ways of being. See the Ozeki section for more on nationalism's relationship to transethnicity.

Turn Jerusalem into an idea. Turn the Temple into a book, a book as vast and holy and intricate as the city itself. Bend a people around the shape of what they lost, and let everything mirror its absent form. Later [ben Zakkai's] school became known as the Great House, after the phrase in Books of Kings: He burned the house of God, the king's house, and all the houses of Jerusalem; even every great house he burned with fire. . . every Jewish soul is built around the house that burned in that fire, so vast that we can, each one of us, only recall the tiniest fragment. . . But if every Jewish memory were put together, every last holy fragment joined up again as one, the House would be built again. (278-79)

Mirroring Krauss and Nadia's framing of the desk in their own stories, ben Zakkai sought to center his narrative on an object turned into subject: a temple written into a book through which a people and their ethnic identities respond and are defined. Weisz's story shows the need for interconnection and the sharing and writing of multiple Jewish memories to rebuild this sacred house. However, his obsession with the table and his skills as a collector—like Nadia's initial belief in her writerly exceptionalism—hinges upon self-alienation and disengagement with others, including his own children. Weisz realizes that he has failed to learn the lessons of ben Zakkai and the object, in its place viewing Jewish ethnic identity—as well as the desk itself—as something to possess and master in isolation.

Nadia's own lessons have a special resonance in light of what Weisz tells Arthur. Her story nears the point where she is about to admit driving the car that hit Dovik, but rather than giving an outright confession, Nadia combines the images of ben Zakkai's Great House and the single locked drawer in Daniel's table with her conflicted perspective on self-expression and identity. She predicts that "soon, maybe not tomorrow or next week, but soon enough the walls around me and roof above me will rise again, exactly as they were before, and the answer to the question that brought them down will

be stuffed into a drawer and locked away. That I will go on again as I always have, with or without the desk” (237). The reference to rising again further invokes the phrase “All Rise,” alluding simultaneously to the title of Nadia’s sections in the novel, to Dovik’s occupation as a judge, and finally to Nadia’s role as both lawyer and witness to her own failings, called upon by the narrative and the object to testify on her own behalf. While ben Zakkai sought to rebuild a people by bending them “around the shape of what they lost,” Nadia realizes that she has formed both her posture and identity around the writing that her surrendered table represents. For Nadia, the desk does not just symbolize the temple, but is the temple in another form. She relates that the object’s extraordinary arrangement of drawers “had come to signify a kind of guiding if mysterious order in my life, an order that, when my work was going well, took on an almost mystical quality.... Those drawers represented a singular logic deeply embedded, a pattern of consciousness that could be articulated in no other way” (16).

Like the women at the Indo-American Center who set themselves apart to assert their identities in contrast to those around them, Nadia and Weisz each pursue an item to authorize specific and instrumental roles that they hope will define their identities and legacies. Their quests, however, have put them out of touch with others—both in and outside of their families and ethnic groups—in potentially devastating ways. In fact, despite her claim that she will continue on as she always has, it becomes evident in the course of telling Dovik her story that Nadia has actually reframed how she perceives her own writing. She no longer views storytelling as an excuse to isolate herself, but instead sees it as a means to relate to others on a personal level. Nadia’s unusual connection to

Dovik re-legitimizes not only her writing, but also her ethnic identity. Dovik's nurse, thinking Nadia his lover rather than the person responsible for his accident, encourages her to talk to Dovik, sending Nadia on the novel's narrative journey.

Toward the end of the text, the nurse requests that Nadia continue telling Dovik her tale, suggesting that this would provide comfort for the patient. Nadia asks the nurse how long she should continue speaking, but then realizes, "I knew I would sit by your side for as long as they let me, until your true wife or lover arrived.... For a thousand and one nights, I thought. More" (238). Nadia likens herself to Scheherazade, who told her series of stories—a Barthesian assemblage of tales—to the Persian king Shahryār for a thousand and one nights. The connection between Nadia and Scheherazade is both inexact and accurate. Despite their subject matter and rhetorical context, both women relayed stories devoid of overt religious themes; in fact, Scheherazade's method would have been the more esteemed version of storytelling in Islamic tradition (Hatem 197). In Nadia's case, however, it is Nadia herself rather than her infirm listener who ostensibly gains insight from the storytelling—at least, as far as we readers can know. After the thought of losing her writing table inspires Nadia to see her written pages as "superfluous words lacking life and authenticity" (19), she now finds herself in Jerusalem having discovered not the desk, but her own worth as a storyteller. Significantly, this worth lies in part with her newly chosen audience, a considerably smaller and more intimate one than any for whom she had written in the past. She tells her story for herself and for the man who we presume is listening in silence.

Krauss abstains from telling her readers what is to become of the judge Dovik and his bewildered and unlikely Scheherazade, but she does hint at a connection beyond the novel's pages, allowing for a brief moment of real responsiveness from Dovik when he opens his eyes and regards Nadia for the first time. The moment of connection between the storyteller and her listener evokes transethnic connection, the idea of regarding the other with openness and vulnerability. After he drifts back into sleep, Nadia continues speaking, telling him, "I wanted to weep and gnash my teeth, Your Honor, to beg your forgiveness, but what came out was a story. I wanted to be judged on what I did with my life, but now I will be judged by how I described it. . . . If you could speak, perhaps you would say that is how it always is" (237). Intriguingly, Nadia's realization is echoed by the second novel discussed in this chapter: In *A Tale for the Time Being*, Ozeki's Jiko regards her teenaged great-granddaughter and similarly observes, "Maybe life is only stories" (246). Both declarations suggest that the stories we tell about ourselves are as significant to the teller as they are to the reader, listener, or observer, and that the connection that emerges can be a valuable source of understanding what makes us who we are.

Facing Destruction: Using People and Trusting People

By likening herself to Scheherazade, Nadia proposes a kind of objectification inspired by usefulness and intimate connection. This relationship, one that Nussbaum would describe in terms of "instrumentality," has certainly taken on negative connotations, for example, when applied to Scheherazade herself. Susan M. Darraj

reminds her readers that while Scheherazade was a writer in her own right, she “suffered terribly at the hands of translators” (1). Darraj laments that the storyteller was “[a]n intelligent woman, schooled in literature, philosophy, and history, reduced to an erotic, shallow, sex-crazed body behind a veil” (2). This kind of objectification—a form of Objectification 1.0 that Darraj describes as happening to many Eastern women immortalized in story form (such as Cleopatra and Muhammad’s wives Khadijah and Aisha), contrasts to that of Nadia’s own assumed form of instrumentality, in part because she also does not allow herself to become close to anyone as does Scheherazade—at least, not until Nadia meets Dovik. For Nadia, the fear that accompanies this very connection has to do with vulnerability and familiarity, with facing her belief that it was “impossible to distrust one’s writing without awakening a deeper distrust in oneself” (34). The act of honestly telling her story to Dovik, and of revising it in order to place the desk at its center, allows her to regard her writerly self as an instrument not to represent a people, but rather with the hope of making a minute but significant connection to another human being. Such a relationship does not diminish her identity; instead, it adds to the dynamic definition of what it means to be a people. Rather than fleeing the scene of the accident, Nadia risks facing her own destruction, and Dovik’s too, and in the process weaves a tale revealing a life of safety and protection—and of isolation.

While viewing someone, including oneself, as a mere object for use can be seen in a negative light, Nadia—like Scheherazade before her—discovers a mode of connection that actually hinges on usefulness directed in a particular, personal direction. She uses Dovik as a means to write her life story, to reframe it in terms of the object that had taken

over her life. In turn, the plea from Dovik's nurse—the novel's opening command for Nadia to "Talk to him" (3, 238)—allows her to find new use for herself as a writer. In light of such moments of instrumentality, Barbara Johnson proposes that another way to describe "using people" would be "'trusting people,' creating a space of play and risk that does not depend on maintaining intactness and separation" (105). Nadia's belief in her anomalous identity as a writer and her accompanying seclusion grew out of her terror in risking intimate connections, which Johnson describes as the ability "to experience the reality of both the other and the self" (105). Nadia fears the destruction of her extraordinary sense of self as a writer and the separation accompanying such a stance. In the face of Dovik's own potential destruction at her hand, she finds her role revised in order to allow for a life filled with others, and then recharged as she tells Dovik her tale.

In fact, the isolation that Nadia initially feels is replicated in the experiences of other writer-protagonists in the novel, often in relation to the imagery of disappearing into unknown depths. Nadia describes her exceptionalism in terms of just needing "to pull myself beneath the surface, to dive down and touch the place within where this mysterious giftedness lived in me" (200). Meanwhile, Arthur is more explicit, lamenting that his wife, novelist Lotte Berg, will remain unknowable to him in her death. His sections of the novel, entitled "Swimming Holes," refer to the literal swimming holes from which Arthur often feared she might never emerge, to her body's slow surrender to Alzheimer's disease, and finally to her secret past and traumatic experience in a Jewish camp. Thinking back on his wife's swimming habits, Arthur observes, "here in this house live two different species, one on land and one in the water, one who clings to the surface

and the other who lurks in the depths, and yet every night, through a loophole in the laws of physics, they share the same bed” (103). Meanwhile, attempting to reach out to his son Dovik a few nights before Nadia runs into him, Aaron asked where he disappears at night. He remembers how Dovik replied with a “long monologue about the construction down the road, something about drainpipes and sinkholes. . . I began to suspect that it had been a test you’d concocted for me, one for which the only possible outcome was my failure, leaving you free to curl back into yourself like a snail, to go on blaming and despising me” (171). Like many writers in the novel, Dovik retreats into himself, a behavior that Aaron likens to below ground imagery. Finally, Daniel Varsky, the Chilean Jewish poet who first gives the desk to Nadia before his death, tells her in a postcard that he is going to join the Chilean Speleological Society, adding, “it won’t interfere with my poetry; if anything the two pursuits [of studying caves and composing poems] are complementary” (13). Despite his more affable nature, Daniel—like Nadia—equates isolation and secrecy with the gift of exceptional writing. The repetition of these images shows this isolation as subterranean. In place of crossing borders—as Nadia finds herself doing in multiple ways when she leaves New York for Jerusalem to pursue the desk, many characters in the novel are entrenched, cut off from the world in their cavernous seclusion.

The shared imagery of secretive identities further reveals how the remarkable singularity that Nadia and her fellow writers pursue in isolation is not as unique as they believe, thus calling for the need to search for “authenticity” of a different nature. George Weisz comes to a similar realization when, looking back on his life and his choices, he

relates how he raised his children to isolate themselves from the rest of the world: “I taught them to say, We’re leaving tomorrow, just as my father, a scholar of history, taught me that the absence of things is more useful than their presence. Though many years later, half a century after he died, I stood on top of a sea wall watching the undertow and thought, Useful for what?” (287). His question brings up the utility of his and his family’s assumed isolation, while also indicating the desire to redirect this instrumentality in a different direction. George once believed that this efficacy was found in his aptitude at retrieving lost objects for Jewish families, but the writing table’s uncanny ability to thwart detection precipitates a moment of candor in his conversation with Arthur. Believing that he has found with Arthur not the item he wants, but yet another story, George divulges that the objects he recovers for his clients are not as genuine as they appear.

In fact, the methods by which George has come into his extraordinary talent as a retriever of objects connects his line of work to the personal and intimate storytelling that Nadia discovers through her confession to Dovik. Sitting with Arthur and admitting, in a rare display of weakness, how the desk “hounds” him (276),⁹⁴ George unveils his secret: that even the most impossible-to-retrieve object—a long-forgotten bed or a table chopped for firewood after WWII—can always be recovered or produced (Krauss 202). “Out of thin air, if need be,” George confesses. “And if the wood is not exactly as he remembers, or the legs are too thick or too thin, he’ll only notice for a moment. . . and then his

⁹⁴ George’s confession is actually prompted both by his stymied pursuit of the table and by his recognition of another “shared” object: George notices that Arthur’s window has just been replaced, and the stone that had broken Arthur’s window reminds George of the rock that shattered his parents’ home in Budapest, igniting the reality of the Holocaust for him and his family.

memory will be invaded by the reality of the bed standing before him. Because he needs it to be that bed where she once lay with him more than he needs to know the truth” (276). Through his admission, George reveals that his talent in finding objects is not so much a gift as it is a “not-truth,” an unspoken agreement about George’s usefulness. Together, he and his clients collaborate to form a story around an object, whether that object is “authentic” or not. Significantly, then, his talent depends not so much on his affinity to know and find objects than it does on his and his client’s abilities to suspend their shared disbelief and to collaborate on a narrative that will allow them both to persevere. “Only connect!” thinks Margaret in E.M. Forster’s *Howard’s End*. “Only connect the prose and the passion, and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer. Only connect, and the beast and the monk, robbed of isolation that is life to either, will die” (Forster 214). Only connect—but what, ask the storytellers of *Great House*, is lost in the connection? What if fragmentation persists despite the connection? What comes of acknowledging this past or, as ben Zakkai would say, bending the shape of a people around what it has lost, and what is gained in return?

One potential response to these questions is found in Krauss’s previous novel, *The History of Love*, which suggests that after all has seemingly vanished, what remains is the sacred object of the story. Whereas *Great House* revolves around a desk, *The History of Love* spotlights a book and the way it is forgotten, translated, passed on, and purloined by various characters in the novel. Leo Gursky, the author of a novel within the novel, comes to realize that he justified his isolation because he was writing for his son Isaac, a

novelist with whom, for reasons having to do with the Holocaust, he had never spoken. After Isaac's death, Gursky discovers, "The world no longer looked the same. . . Only now that my son was gone did I realize how much I'd been living for him. When I woke up in the morning it was because he existed, and when I ordered food it was because he existed, and when I wrote my book it was because he existed to read it" (Krauss *History* 80). Having been fearful of the potential rejection that may come from his revealing his identity to his son, Gursky is now faced with destruction of a different sort—a permanent mental isolation that could overtake his distraught mind in the wake of his grief.

In the midst of this breakdown, Gursky—like Nadia, George, and many others in Krauss's novels—decides to tell a story, writing down a narrative that enthralls and enchants the readers who later find the manuscript (and who, appropriately for a novel that shares themes of plagiarism with novels like Foer's *Everything is Illuminated*, attribute the text to Isaac). Ultimately, the characters in both of Krauss's novels find solace and a renewed sense of self in explaining their identities to others and in converting their words into a narrative, something that can be shared and passed on. It is no wonder that the novel's title, *Great House*, takes its cue from a similar act of writing, that of ben Zakkai's instruction after the destruction of Jerusalem. Krauss describes this historic moment of composition in an interview with Jennie Gritz as "taking the oral law and beginning to codify it into what will become the Talmud, a book, which can be taken anywhere. And to me, this is so beautiful. Because the answer to catastrophic loss was absolute reimagination. It's a Jewish story, but it's a very universal idea." In the face of destruction, ben Zakkai found use for himself and those around him as writers. The act of

creation and reimagination, which for ben Zakkai and Krauss is synonymous with writing, does not take root in fear, but rather in hope and affiliation.

Memory Objects: The Sky Soldier and the Beached Package in Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*

...half an hour later the thought that it was time to go to sleep would awaken me; I would try to put away the book which, I imagined, was still in my hands, and to blow out the light; I had been thinking all the time, while I was asleep, of what I had just been reading, but my thoughts had run into a channel of their own, until I myself seemed actually to have become the subject of my book...
--Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time, Volume I: Swann's Way*

While Nadia and her fellow protagonists struggle with issues related to trust and the risks that come with accepting that trust, the two authors who tell Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* deal with crises related to their identities as Japanese Americans, their isolation stemming less from deliberate attempts at separation and more from the circumstances under which they live. As transnational individuals, they are also representative of the types of persons who Shelley Fisher Fishkin describes as having "been marginalized precisely because they crossed so many borders that they are hard to categorize" (30). Living on an island in British Columbia, the character Ruth Ozeki (who I will refer to from now on as "Ruth" in order to avoid confusion with the real-life author) finds herself homesick for New York City after losing her mother to Alzheimer's. In a timeline before that of Ruth's, Nao, a transfer student from Sunnyvale, California, is bullied because of her inability to fit in with her classmates in Akihabara, Japan. Ruth first "meets" the teenaged Nao while walking along the BC coastline with her husband,

Oliver. When she sees a plastic parcel on the sand, she believes it is debris from the aftermath of the Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami which devastated the Japanese islands in 2011. Inside the doubly-wrapped plastic bag, she discovers a Hello Kitty lunchbox containing what appears to be a copy of Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (or *In Search of Lost Time*), in addition to a packet of old letters written in Japanese, a composition notebook with French writing inside, and a broken watch. The Proust novel turns out to be what Nao calls a book “hack”⁹⁵: Proust’s eternal prose has been replaced with blank pages, upon which Nao has written about her ostracism from her classmates and her newfound friendship with her great-grandmother, a Zen Buddhist nun named Jiko. While Americans conventionally associate Buddhism with a minimalist asceticism that attempts to transcend mere objects, Fabio Rambelli writes that, in actuality, “rosaries, amulets and talismans, funerary tablets, relics, images, containers of sacred objects, priestly and ceremonial robes, [...] registers and miscellaneous documents, ritual implements, postcards , and souvenirs—all these material entities play some role in ceremonies, devotional activities, and in a broader sense, in the way Buddhists define their identity” (1). The focus on objects in a novel that features, at the center of Nao and Ruth’s discussion, the Zen Buddhist nun Jiko, is therefore not so unusual once we understand the place that objects have in Buddhist traditions.

The objects Ruth finds—the lunchbox, the diary, the letters, and the watch—are fished out of the saltwater and barnacles of the Pacific to become both symbol and

⁹⁵ Nao’s life is pervaded by digital elements, including her classmates’ bullying, which takes place in both physical and virtual spaces, and her father’s various programming-related occupations. Similarly, when Ruth has her third dream (see the next section), the jungle crow in her dream initially appears as a pixilated image (347, 349). For more on aspects of the digital as they relate to authorship and connection, see the Syjuco section in the next chapter.

testimony of Nao and Ruth's transnational connection and of the memories that they collectively share and unearth. Together, these objects point to the kinds of ethnic alliances that challenge the authority of national boundaries and even, more generally, the limitations of time and space. At the same time, they reveal the potential dangers of placing too much weight on the national identities upon which multiculturalism commonly depends in order to define ethnicity. In fact, one of the main characteristics of the model minority stereotype for which Asian Americans are known is their apparent ability to inhabit an explicit and exemplary American national identity, one that supposedly exceeds that of other non-white ethnic groups. This section will focus on the text's narrative objects as they literally cross oceans and borders, showing how Ozeki's novel highlights the shortcomings of the United States' emphasis on national identity as a replacement for, or as a more superior version of, ethnic identity. At the same time, I argue that these objects draw attention to an alternative ethnic connection based on memory and interaction, uniting characters as disparate as the emotionally distraught teenager Nao and the older, more logical Ruth in a relationship that is at once transnational and yet startlingly intimate.



Figure 5. Hello Kitty Display in Washington, D.C.

While housing the novel's major objects in a Hello Kitty lunchbox may seem whimsical and frivolous, Ozeki actually uses the pervasive image of Hello Kitty to underscore the transnational nature of Ruth and Nao's burgeoning connection and the difficulties they face in expressing their ethnic identities. Hello Kitty, a white, mouthless, and typically feminized feline, is the icon of Japanese company Sanrio, a corporation that devised its flagship character as a "global product" (Yano 9; see figure 5).⁹⁶ In her study on Hello Kitty entitled *Pink Globalization*, Christine R. Yano identifies the character as part of a cultural trend known as *mukokuseki*, which means "without nationality" (16). In the case of Sanrio, this meant creating a product that would not be associated with Japan but would in its place have a vaguely Western (and apparently more marketable) origin.⁹⁷ The dominance of American and European global presence, or what Yano describes

⁹⁶ Incidentally, this global rebranding extends to the company name itself. Tsuji Shintarō, the founder of Yamanashi Silk Center Co., Ltd., renamed his company Sanrio to signify the corporation's shift from dry goods to fanciful items targeted to girls and also to reference "California, home of his hero and idol Walt Disney" (Yano 15). In this way, the business name coincidentally invokes Nao's California hometown of Sunnyvale.

⁹⁷ Yano notes that, at the time of Hello Kitty's introduction to the U.S. shortly after its 1974 conception, the reputation of goods made in Japan was that they were cheap and poorly manufactured (16).

explicitly as “white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant” cultures (18), thus underlies even the design of a commodity meant to be “nation-less.” As global corporations become more ubiquitous, and Sanrio’s profile more visible, the company has since capitalized on its association with the culture of “Japanese Cute-Cool” (Yano 9), a way of commodifying cuteness while associating it with a monolithic national identity. Notably, this culture is one that equates Japanese goods with marketable versions of cuteness, while at the same time allowing Hello Kitty’s international consumers to project their own personalities, storylines, and even ethnic and national origins, onto the silent character.⁹⁸

Ruth and Nao, living in Canada and Japan respectively, similarly find themselves faced with the nature of what it means to be without a nation or even an apparent nationality, while also discovering that certain nationalized markers of ethnicity are involuntarily thrust upon them by others. Nao, for instance, knows full well of the associations of Japanese girls with images of Hello-Kitty-like sweetness and diminution, lamenting that, in contrast to her “cute” classmates, Nao’s Americanness caused her to look and feel “like a big old stinky lump” (46).⁹⁹ She is quick to note that her father, now

⁹⁸ As Ken Belson and Brian Bremner note, “With few exceptions, her [that is, Hello Kitty’s] creators at Sanrio Ltd. have purposely shied away from developing any story to her life, instead leaving her personality to the eyes and minds of the beholder. This Zen-like technique, intentionally or not, has allowed Kitty to become at once the princess of purity to toddlers, a cuddly playmate for young girls and a walk down memory lane for adults yearning for another taste of childhood” (4).

⁹⁹ For more information about multiculturalism in Japan, see Lam Peng-Er’s “At the Margins of a Liberal-Democratic State: Ethnic Minorities in Japan,” Keiko Yamanaka’s “Citizenship, Immigration and Ethnic Hegemony in Japan,” and Stephen Murphy-Shigematsu’s “‘The Invisible Man’ and Other Narratives of Living in the Borderlands of Race and Nation.” While Murphy-Shigematsu informs us that Japan is thoroughly multiethnic in its origins, Japan’s image as a monoethnic nation persists, thus making it easy for many to conflate nationality with ethnicity when referring to the Japanese (284), and to make the kinds of generalizations that Nao is sometimes prone to making when contrasting American and Japanese differences. Peng-Er would argue that this conflation is not helped by Japanese society’s “social conservatism and illiberalism,” which supersedes multicultural government policy (225), though Yamanaka’s exploration into Japan’s immigration policy suggests that more is at play than merely a clash between government and societal practices (141).

unemployed and suicidal in Japan, was more self-possessed and happier in Sunnyvale, explaining in her diary that she and her father “were American, at least in our hearts” (47). Like Sol in Gina Apostol’s *The Gun Dealer’s Daughter* or Henry in Chang Rae Lee’s *Native Speaker*, Nao finds nationality unhelpful in making herself apparent to others. She grasps that she was never the popular girl in Sunnyvale, nor is she able to fit in with her classmates in Japan, either. As Nao becomes the victim of violent bullying (or *ijime*) in school and online because of her foreigner status (48), she perceives herself associated with an Americanness that she feels more strongly in Akihabara than she ever did in California. Her lack of belonging causes her to lose a sense of herself, exacerbated by her alienation from her former friends in California, who Nao feels can sense her reputation as a teenaged pariah even “from the opposite side of the ocean” (126). Like the Hello Kitty icon that emblazons her lunchbox, Nao finds herself at the intersection of various ideas of national and ethnic identities, mouthless and unable to express herself—that is, until she begins writing in her diary.

Meanwhile, Ruth initially observes her move from Manhattan to Whaletown (a ferry town on Cortes Island) through an objectified distance, characterizing it as “just trading one island for another” (57). Nevertheless, while Ruth’s small Whaletown community is more than welcoming, and while her Americanness is not met with the same problems as Nao experiences in Japan, Ruth soon feels the need to remind her neighbors that Cortes Island once housed a Japanese family who, like her mother’s family, were banished to an internment camp during WWII. In fact, the final destination of Nao’s seaworthy package was at the end of the beach where the Japanese family lived

before they were forced to leave. Pointing out that multiculturalism in both the United States and Canada has covered over less broadminded aspects of ethnic history, Ruth stresses that “it was important to not let New Age correctness erase the history of the island” (32).¹⁰⁰ While neighbors thus feel compelled to bring her Japanese drift that washes onto the beach as if she were the curator of such foreign items, Ruth feels a slight detachment from these artifacts, and from her Japanese identity, especially since her mother passed away. To add to this disengagement, Ruth finds herself compelled to ask for help translating the Japanese letters written by Nao’s great-uncle, the philosopher and reluctant kamikaze pilot, Haruki. After opening Nao’s lunchbox and reviewing its contents, Ruth realizes that claiming a Japanese heritage comes with assumptions of a linguistic, cultural, and historical knowledge that she is unable to fulfill, despite her neighbor’s well-intentioned assumptions that she should be able to do so.



Figure 6. Early 1945 Image of Japanese Planes Preparing for a Kamikaze Attack.

¹⁰⁰ A lot of scholarship has been written on ideals of tolerance and diversity in a specifically Canadian context. See, for example, Richard J.F. Day’s *Multiculturalism and the History of Canadian Diversity* as well as Will Kymlicka’s work, including *Finding our Way: Rethinking Ethnocultural Relations in Canada* and his co-authored work with Janice Stein, et. al. entitled *Uneasy Partners: Multiculturalism and Rights in Canada*.

In fact, while the marketing and production history of Sanrio's Hello Kitty points to the dynamic ways that nationality is mobilized in order to present a more likable image, Haruki's letters—also included in the lunchbox—highlight the dangers of nationalist thinking and the lack of agency that comes with such preoccupations. Called Haruki #1 to differentiate him from Nao's dad (his namesake and nephew Harry), Nao's great-uncle writes these letters to his mother Jiko after he is drafted. The letters attempt to explain his choice of joining the Tokubetsu Kōgekitai (特攻隊) or Special Attack Force, better known in American history as the kamikaze pilots (see figure 6).¹⁰¹ When Nao meets Jiko and begins chronicling both her and her great-grandmother's life in her diary, she uses her great-uncle's letters to bridge a closer connection to her ancestors. What she and Ruth (who reads the letters after they wash up on shore) do not anticipate is that Haruki #1's writing will give them a window into the emotional struggles he faced between his own personal philosophy and his sense of duty to his country. In the letters, he reports that his recruiter "ordered us to 'switch off our hearts and minds completely.' He instructed us to cut off our love and sever our attachment with our family and blood relations because from now on we were soldiers and our loyalty must lie solely with our Emperor and our homeland of Japan" (252). Haruki chooses to sign up as a Special

¹⁰¹ There is a deliberate doubling with Haruki #1's story, and that of Nao's father, Haruki #2, or Harry. Not only do the two share the same given name, but they also share a proclivity for Western philosophers. (Notably, Haruki #1 seems to find more solace in Eastern philosophy—particularly Dōgen—as he approaches death.) Harry's various suicide attempts in Akihabara after the dot-com bubble burst further connect the two in terms of their pursuits of death, though Nao explicitly differentiates her great-uncle's death as more honorable and courageous than her father's failed attempts. Given Ruth's initial belief that the lunchbox and its contents washed ashore in the wake of Typhoon Wipha and Haruki #1's misgivings about devoting his life to his country, the etymology of "kamikaze" (or "divine wind" or "wind of the gods") is further notable, the Oxford English Dictionary noting that the word originally referred to the typhoon that allowed the Japanese to defeat the Mongols in 1281. The battle in which Haruki gives his life is the 1945 Battle of Okinawa, which Haruki calls by its Japanese name, the "typhoon of steel" (327).

Attack Force pilot in part for practical reasons (the position allows him to pass on an increased pension to Jiko and his sisters), but also because the death allows him a sense of agency. Rather than becoming victim of a random attack, Haruki believes he will “be able to control and therefore appreciate, intimately and exactly, the moments leading up to my death. . . I have chosen the death that will bring most benefit to the ones I love, and that will cause me the least grief in the next life to come. I will die a free man” (257).

While he does not explicitly say so, possibly because the Japanese government monitors his letters, his taking charge of his death defies his recruiting officer’s orders to cut off all emotional ties in order to more effectively embrace a national identity. Instead, Haruki redefines his death as an act of love not for his country, but for his family and his sense of being in the world.

Haruki’s defiance is confirmed in his journal, a slim composition booklet in which he writes his true thoughts. Like Irene in Erdrich’s *Shadow Tag*, Haruki keeps two diaries, telling his mother that there is “one for show, and this hidden one for truth, for you” (317). Though Ruth is unsure as to how it came to be found there, she unearths his hidden journal in the packet of letters, observing that the notebook was “the kind a student might once have used in university to write an essay exam” (94). Ruth’s is a keen description given that Nao later reveals in her journal that Haruki was actually only 19 years old, a university student studying philosophy and French literature when he was drafted. Nao adds, “from what Jiko said, besides being peaceful, [Haruki] was also a cheerful, optimistic boy who actually liked being alive, which is not at all the situation with me or my dad” (179). In the diary’s last pages, Haruki reveals his plan for his final

moment of insolent nationalism, telling Jiko, “I will give my life for my country. . . . knowing what I do about the depravity with which this war has been waged, I am determined to do my utmost to steer my plane away from my target and into the sea” (328). The composition book, then, reveals and symbolizes Haruki’s ultimate sacrifice—one that hides under the guise of patriotism, but protests its limitations on his actions and beliefs.



Figure 7. Jurin, Julius. “Seikosha Big Pilot Watch.” Possible example of the kind of watch that may have been worn by Haruki #1.

Haruki’s broken watch, included in the lunchbox, thus becomes a physical manifestation of the limits of his individual expression. The watch not only suggests a life prematurely foreshortened, but also points to the urgency that Haruki places upon himself to stay faithful to his beliefs about the nation’s power to define him, while at the same time keeping his family safe and provided for after his death. Ruth reads Haruki’s military identification numbers on the watch, above which are two Japanese characters: The first she recognizes as the kanji for “sky.” She has to look up the second kanji, which she learns stands for “soldier.” After some research, she realizes that the Seiko Company

manufactured these watches during WWII, and that kamikaze fighters—the “sky soldiers”—preferred them (Ozeki 85; see figure 7).¹⁰² In his composition book, Haruki notes that the Japanese military will be bequeathing the watch to Jiko and his sister along with his other personal effects; in turn, Jiko bequeaths the watch to Nao, instructing her to wind it daily (327, 249). Ruth’s discovery of the package on the beach constitutes the watch’s final bequeathal: Nao gives the watch to her imagined reader, the package “meant for only one special person.” Addressing this reader directly, Nao continues, “it feel like I’m reaching forward through time to touch you, and now that you’ve found it, you’re reaching back to touch me!” (26). After floating around as drift for several years, Ruth restarts the clock. In this symbolic act of winding up the sky soldier watch, Ruth thus begins her life-changing journey, one that allows her to find an unlikely connection across oceans of time and space, and to cross boundaries she never thought possible.

¹⁰² According to Katsuya Izumi, the two characters across the top on either side of this image are 空, meaning Sky, and 兵, meaning Soldier. Izumi goes on to state, “As Ozeki explains in the novel, 空 also means Empty or Emptiness, and it is used many times in important Buddhist sutras.” The vertical characters refer to the thousand and twenty-first, which may refer to the regiment or division to which the original watch owner belonged.

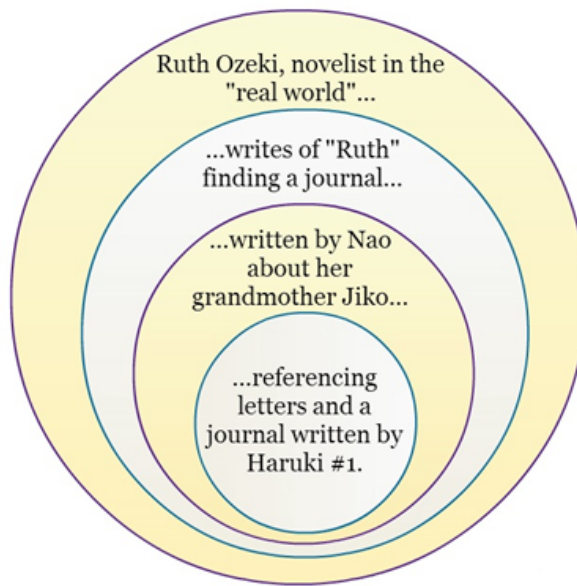


Figure 8. The Storyworlds of *A Tale for the Time Being*.

Haruki's writings as well as his death similarly speak to his attempts to traverse national border lines that are physical and theoretical, both in terms of his interest in other languages and philosophies, as well as in his belief that he can surpass these boundaries through his death, crossing over into a realm of existence that is essentially *mukokuseki*, or without nationality. Haruki's experiences reflect the kind of crossing of borders that characterize Ruth and Nao's connections with each other through their writing. While Nao's journal is separated from Ruth both in terms of years and geographical distance, Ruth nonetheless eventually manages to cross over into Nao's narrative world—or what David Herman and others would call a “storyworld” (Herman 15), in part through the journal that Nao writes in-between the covers of the hacked Proust volume. Earlier passages in Nao's diary, and of Ruth's experience of reading the diary, hint at Ruth's newfound ability to traverse storyworlds. It is in fact Ruth's very interactions with all of

the objects in Nao's lunchbox that allow her to cross into Nao and Jiko's storyworld, a feat that narratologists refer to as metalepsis.¹⁰³ The intricate and interweaving storyworlds of *A Tale for the Time Being* can be envisioned in concentric circles of framing narratives (see figure 8), where Ruth's story frames Nao's diary, which in turn encompasses the stories of her great-grandmother Jiko and her great-uncle Haruki. While more explicit examples of these storyworld crossings and their significance will be discussed in the next section, Nao's choice of a journal will serve for now to illustrate how the lines dividing these narrative spaces begin to bend and shift. The blurring of these worlds illustrate the kind of border-crossing that Nao and Ruth—and in his own way, Haruki—accomplish in connection with the objects that Ruth finds on the shore.

In fact, not unlike the lunchbox, Nao's journal serves to illustrate how, not only is a book more than its cover, but the cover itself can be more significant than it first appears. Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* may seem an odd choice for 16-year old Nao, who explains that she picked it up in part because of its size and because she knew that her classmates would find little interest in a thick book with a French title; "they wouldn't even know what it meant," she adds (21). However, the novel also represents the persona that she wishes to project as a writer, Nao explaining that "French is cool and has a sophisticated feeling" (22). She purchased the book "pre-hacked" by a famous

¹⁰³ See the next section for a more extensive discussion of metalepsis as a narrative phenomenon in Ozeki's text. For more on metalepsis in general, see Gerard Genette (who first appropriated the term from Pierre Fontanier), as well as H. Porter Abbott, Monika Fludernik, and Debra Malina. Marie-Laure Ryan explores metalepsis in digital realms: While I present the storyworlds in the form of concentric circles, Ryan likens them to "stacks," a term familiar to programmers. The metaphor is effective in showing how the hierarchy of stories constantly shifts based on which level of the stack is more prominent in the narrative, but—as Ryan notes—it sets up a false divide when ontological levels are breached, as happens in Ozeki's novel. Not surprisingly, Ryan uses Scheherazade's multi-leveled storytelling as an example of her concept (204-6).

crafter who replaced the printed pages with blank pages in so skilled a fashion that “you almost think that the letters just slipped off the pages and fell to the floor” (20). The weighty nature of the book, and of Nao’s own impression of Proust, causes her to approach her writing with an added seriousness, partly because she wants to avoid upsetting Proust’s ghost. Nonetheless, just as the freed slave Calhoun reappropriates the captain’s log in Charles Johnson’s *Middle Passage*, Nao overwrites Proust’s prose, using the hacked pages as a kind of extended suicide note in response to her father’s attempted suicides and to her own increasingly violent encounters with bullying at school. Nao’s ultimate authorial intention is that she will record her story and Jiko’s life before she dies (23).

While Nao is unfamiliar with the original contents of Proust’s text (she conducts a web search for the title for an English translation and is pleased that it references lost time, a favorite subject of hers), Proust’s focus on memory resonates with both Nao and Ruth, for different but interconnected reasons. The first volume of Proust’s seven-volume text, *Du côté de chez Swann* (or *Swann’s Way*), includes one of the novel’s most famous scenes, where the narrator is made to recall childhood events that had previously been inaccessible to him. Significantly, what prompts these unlocked memories is an object—specifically, the taste of a madeleine cake dipped in tea which prompts a flood of unbidden remembrances (Proust 50), what scholars refer to as involuntary memory.¹⁰⁴

Through the objects with which Nao and Ruth interact, Ozeki’s novel redefines

¹⁰⁴ The narrator notes that “the whole of Combray and of its surroundings, taking their proper shape and growing solid, sprang into being, town and gardens alike, from my cup of tea” (Proust 54). For more on involuntary memory, see, for example, Ann Tukey, who further notes that the French phrasing places the narrator in the object position or even reframes the narrator *as* an object, “gripped, manipulated by” the pleasure of the experience of the unprovoked memory (398).

involuntary memory as a more interactive and collective connection. While the tea and cookies in Proust's text allow the narrator to relive memories that ostensibly belong to him, Ruth and Nao discover a more dynamic relationship to the things in their possession: Namely, they find themselves haunted by objects that invoke memories that are not their own. While reading Nao's journal, Ruth in particular is troubled in her sleep by several dreams of Nao's great-grandmother Jiko, who appears to directly address Ruth across time and space. The ghostly dreams further invoke Ruth's mother Masako, who recently died from Alzheimer's disease, an illness characterized in part by an involuntary loss of memory.

Meanwhile, Nao uses remembering as a method for defining her own ethnic and national identity. While not born in the United States, she writes in her diary that she does not "have any memory of Japan from when I was a baby. As far as I'm concerned, my whole life started and ended in Sunnyvale, which makes me American" (43). Later, lamenting how far removed she feels from that American part of her, she writes that her days in Sunnyvale "seem realer than my real life now, but at the same time it's like a memory belonging to a totally different Nao Yasutani. Maybe that Nao of the past never really existed" (96). Such identifications speak to ethnic identity as intimate and relative, tied more to individual experience and interconnection with others, rather than with any specific form of government-assigned national consciousness. Nao's incidental selection of Proust's novel allows her and Ruth to contemplate the intricacies of time and remembering, opening up the potential for other involuntary memories. For example, Nao's journal, hidden in the covers of a volume of Proust's French novel, acts as an

inadvertent echo of Haruki's own diary, which he keeps concealed on his person, and written in French as an added security measure (226).

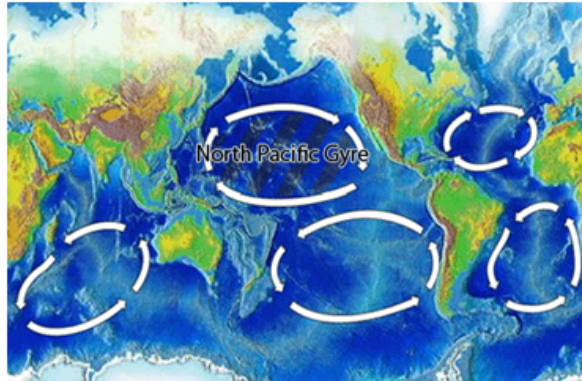


Figure 9. North Pacific Gyre.

In fact, memories in Ozeki's texts are not only prompted by objects, but take on the weight and heft of objects in their own right. For example, Ruth's husband Oliver identifies objects that themselves constitute memory incarnate. He relates that the flotsam of Nao's lunchbox of objects came to their shore via a gyre, one of several large vortexes across the oceans of the world (see figure 9). Oliver identifies the debris that gets caught up in the gyre as "drift," adding that the "drift that stays in the orbit of the gyre is considered to be part of the gyre *memory*" (14, emphasis mine). The association between these memory objects and water bleeds over into Nao's journal, when she relates that "sometimes when [Jiko] told stories about the past her eyes would get teary from all the memories she had, but they weren't tears. She wasn't crying. They were just the memories, leaking out" (248). Jiko's tears and stories, and the debris that make up part of the gyre, act as an international collection of objects, revealing to us ourselves and our

history, and allowing us to connect personal memories to broader perspectives on ethnic identity.

Metalepsis, Plot Holes, and Border Crossing

When Ruth first restarts Haruki's watch, she is unaware of what the action will symbolize in terms of her own metaleptic crossing of storyworlds and what we might call "storytimes." Mark Currie defines metalepsis as "frame-breaking, a crossing of some uncrossable boundary between different orders of reality or being, as when a character steps out of a fiction, or an author steps into it to interact with characters" (3). While Ozeki portrays this phenomenon optimistically as aiding the goals of transethnicity, Marie-Laure Ryan gives an oddly negative and clinical context to such traversals, describing them as "interpenetration, or mutual contamination" (207). Other theorists use similar language to describe metalepsis as "an '*unnatural*,' physically impossible bottom-up border crossing" that occurs when "the border between. . . worlds is *violated*" (Wolf 114; Abbott 170, emphasis mine). In the face of such "unnatural" violations, Ozeki insistently frames metalepsis as productive and even vital to the intimate connection that unites Ruth and Nao, as well as other writers, readers, and characters across storyworlds and storytimes. Thus, just as Nao and her lunchbox have crossed national borders in order to connect with Ruth, Ruth herself crosses into other storyworlds to form friendships with Nao and Jiko. This section will show how Ruth's metaleptic journeys, not unlike the ability to complicate the limitations of national borders, enact narratological negotiations

that empower Ozeki's characters to pursue definitions of the self often overlooked in multicultural celebrations of ethnic identities.

Ruth's metaleptic powers ultimately allow her to save Nao and Harry's lives, while also igniting a friendship that traverses the limitations of time and space. Like Kiese Laymon's book within a book in *Long Division*, or even the antique manuscript in Mat Johnson's *Pym*, Ruth's interactions with objects such as Nao's journal and Jiko's glasses enable her to cross worlds in metafictionally productive ways that allow for transethnic interactions between her and the other characters from other storyworlds. These items are themselves capable of operating at the crossroads of what Christian Moraru identifies as "memorious" moments of "prodigious, 'compulsive' cultural recollection" (21), producing transethnic subjects who narrate and alter their worldview in relation to the objects. The objects that incite Ruth's world-crossing thus become what Latour would call mediators, things which "transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry" (39). Mediators then are authors that write their roles and meanings. Working from the idea that objects have the potential to be mediators allows for multiple frames of thought—for contradiction, uncertainty, and interpretations that might have been dismissed as existing outside of the "the already established idiom of the social" (Latour 42). Ruth's mediators thus herald her objectual metalepsis, inspiring unexpected connections with Nao, Jiko, and others.

In fact, Jiko's ability to occupy multiple planes of existence seems almost cliché given her status in the novel as an ancient Zen Buddhist nun capable of interacting with others in both physical and spiritual realms. Through a series of dreams inspired by her

nightly readings of Nao's journal and empowered by her donning of Jiko's glasses, Ruth eventually learns how to cross over into the storyworld of the journal. In the first dream, Ruth is a mere spectator, what in the previous chapter was described as an uninvolved bystander or watchman. She observes Jiko, tucked away in her remote temple of Jigenji, answering a question that Nao has texted her (39-40).¹⁰⁵ This first dream deliberately echoes the act of passively reading a novel. Like many readers, Ruth feels no responsibility to the people in the scene or the actions depicted. Devoid of metafictional self-referentiality, such a removed perspective frees the reader from any implications of shared responsibility. In this kind of reading, the text is what Latour might call a mere intermediary, "transport[ing] meaning or force without transformation" (39).¹⁰⁶ Ruth serenely reads the scene from a distance, captivated but otherwise unaccountable to the events unfolding before her.

The second dream constitutes Jiko's open invitation to Ruth to traverse storyworlds as an active reader, an invitation Ruth must accept by taking on Jiko's literal object of vision: Jiko's glasses as mediator. Ruth returns to the scene of her first dream.

¹⁰⁵ While there is a temple in Japan named Jigen-ji (慈眼寺), this temple is located in Osaka Prefecture, several hundred miles from the Miyagi Prefecture where Ozeki places old Jiko. Nao and her father's descriptions of the many steep mountainous steps leading up the temple suggest that Ozeki may have also had the Miyagi mountain temple of Risshaku-ji (立石寺), also known as Yama-dera (山寺), in mind when she wrote the novel. The temple is reputed to have approximately 1,015 steps leading to its topmost sanctuary. The name Jigen-ji is associated in Ruth's appendix (411) with three kanji: 慈, meaning "merciful," 眼 referring to the eye or sight, and 寺, which Ruth identifies as "temple," but which Izumi actually states is "time," the kanji for "temple" being a very similar 寺. Izumi suggests that the typo, whether intentional or not, points to Ruth's need to wait for a time when she can see things mercifully. Ruth's later donning Jiko's glasses in her dream supports this perspective.

¹⁰⁶ As Latour himself notes, the relationship between intermediaries and mediators is quite fluid, with objects having the potential to evolve from one into the other. He adds, "The real difference between the two schools of thought becomes visible when the 'means' or 'tools' used in 'construction' are treated as mediators and not as mere intermediaries" (39). In other words, our relationship to the objects and the way in which we regard them is what opens up broader, more intricate ways of accessing social associations.

However, in this version, evocative of the Japanese jungle crow that appeared on Ruth's property when the story began, Jiko "unfurl[s] the wide black wing of her sleeve" (122), summoning Ruth to her side and inviting her to don the spectacles. Jiko's metaleptic beckoning is more than Ruth can handle: Unaccustomed to the unnatural feeling of perceiving storyworlds through Jiko's eyes, Ruth balks as the dream turns into a nightmare. Ruth laments that Jiko's "lenses were too thick and too strong, smearing and dismantling the whole world as she knew it. . . as [Ruth] struggled, the smear of the world began to absorb her, swirling and howling like a whirlwind and casting her back into a place or condition that was unformed, that she couldn't find words for" (122). In fact, disorientation, particularly in relation to a skewed vision, is a trope in both Krauss and Ozeki's novels that can be seen as an offshoot of the breakdown associated with Apostol and Erdrich's texts. For example, in *Great House*, while Yoav and Isabel are visiting one of George Weisz's clients in order to retrieve a piece of furniture, he accidentally breaks his glasses. Isabel observes that, "Maybe it was because he saw the world differently now, but after [his] glasses broke a kind of sadness seeped out of him, trailing behind him as we followed him... He seemed to have forgotten why we'd come—he never mentioned the table, or maybe it was a chest of drawers, or a clock, or chair" (149).

The need to change one's perspective—to see the world differently—often accompanies these moments of bewilderment. Ozeki's association of glasses as an extension of one's self and vision finds a correlation in her previous novel, *My Year of Meats*, in which documentarian Jane Takagi-Little pointedly refers to her camera, and by

extension her cameraman Suzuki, as “my eye” (327). Through her direct invitation, Jiko acts as the text’s metaleptic ambassador, leading Ruth into a world whose boundaries are more fluid than she had previously believed. Ruth’s initial failure to fully take on Jiko’s worldview uncovers the inherent difficulty in transgressing national and historical borders.

Ruth’s contemplation of a different object—namely, Haruki’s secret composition book—inspires Ruth’s third dream, one that further seals her connection and responsibility to Nao, Jiko, and their family. While the content of Haruki’s diary spurs Ruth and Nao’s questioning of the enforcement of nationalist identities, the very mystery of how the diary came to be included in the packet of Haruki’s letters is what finally ignites Ruth’s metaleptic abilities. After all, Haruki pens his last entry in the clandestine diary the night before he propels his plane into the sea, and it would have been impossible to publicly mail the diary to Jiko without endangering his family’s posthumous access to his pension. Of the composition book, Ruth wonders, “It’s real, but how did it get here? How did it end up in the freezer bag and here in my hands?” (329). The conundrum of how the diary gets included in the parcel that Ruth finds onshore, and the mystery of why Nao—at least at this moment in the story—does not know of its existence, is a plot hole that Ruth is incapable of explicating.

Like many moments in the novel, Ruth’s confusion is mirrored by calamity in Nao’s journal, the teenager realizing that she was ready to commit suicide, that her father may have already done so, and that her beloved “old Jiko” was experiencing her last moments on earth as well. In the wake of these sober realizations, Nao also loses faith in

her reader, proclaiming, “But the fact is, you’re a lie. You’re just another stupid story I made up out of thin air because I was lonely and needed someone to spill my guts to. . . I knew when I started this diary that I couldn’t keep it up, because in my heart of hearts, I never believed in your existence” (340). Following this devastating entry, Ruth is alarmed to realize that the pages that follow, once filled with Nao’s bubbly handwriting, are now empty. Like Yuniór’s encounter with the *páginas en blanco* in Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, Ruth’s confusion washes over her in what the novel implies is a dream, the third oneiric metalepsis in the text. With Ruth, the philosophical impetus behind the blank pages is multiple: Every writer of every text becomes somehow implicated in that text, and every reader and witness shares responsibility for the tale that follows. Or, as Jiko tells Nao, “Life is full of stories. Or maybe life is only stories” (246).

Ruth’s consternation at the blank pages, paired with the “plot hole” brought on by Haruki’s secret composition book, inspires Ruth’s metaleptic expedition. She witnesses the horror of Haruki #1’s life as a soldier, sees through the smearing, storyworld-shattering lenses of Jiko’s glasses, and finally decides to be a passive reader no longer. Instead, following the path of her internationally-traveling jungle crow, Ruth chooses to save Nao by first saving Nao’s father, Harry. Pleading with Harry to not go forward with his suicide, Ruth explains that Nao is “planning to kill herself, and you’re the only one who can stop her. She needs you. And we need her” (353). Ruth’s first real moment of acknowledging the connection with and dependence she has upon the brazen teenaged author further unlocks Ruth’s metaleptic abilities. After convincing Harry that Nao, cruelly bullied online and in school, needs him more than ever, Ruth then realizes she is

holding Haruki #1's composition booklet. The object spurs her to action. Without further thought, Ruth makes her way through the temple grounds, where she places his diary in the same place where Nao previously found his watch and letters, thus closing up the plot hole surrounding that object, leaving Nao and her father to find it, and giving them a project to translate, read, and contemplate together.

Having overcome her inability to negotiate the divisions between storyworlds, Ruth finally comes to realize her own strength through metalepsis, through a transethnic crossing of worlds, words, and borders in order to live up to her intimate responsibility to another. In a sense, by becoming an active reader through her metaleptic journey and by interacting directly with objects in the physical and dream space, Ruth has managed to overcome the writer's block that has plagued her own work. Relating her dream to Oliver, and specifically her placement of the composition book in Jiko's study, she suggests, "I felt a little bit like a superhero just then" (394). Her husband, impressed, agrees that her actions were intelligent and justified, if only to give them some kind of explanation for how Haruki's diary came to be found in the packet of letters and how Harry later appears at Nao's side as she winded her way back to the temple to tend to the ailing Jiko. Ruth thus realizes that metalepsis can be a courageous literary act, unlocking what old Jiko would call her "supapawa!" (190), her facility in crossing authorial and metaphysical borders she had once deemed impossible to navigate.

Another possible, though equally mystifying, literary explanation for the recovered diary comes from Toni Morrison, whose concept of rememory in her novel

Beloved suggests that memories have the power to essentially become objects occupying physical space. The protagonist Sethe tells her daughter Denver,

Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it's you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else. . . if you go there—you who never was there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again. (43-4)

Much like the drift that floats in the oceanic gyres, memories, then, become their own agents, objects willfully persisting against the human tendency to forget or cover over even the most shameful events in history. The polysemic closing refrain of Morrison's novel, "It was not a story to pass on" (323-4), points to the difficulty in facing events such as Haruki #1's perils during WWII. We cannot forget or pass on these stories, but must instead share them and pass them on. While Ruth never learns the exact circumstances under which the lunchbox and its contents wash up on her shore, she nonetheless is able to recognize their ability to help convey stories to others—to teach her about herself and about overcoming the physical and metaphysical isolation of her remote island in order to share responsibility for the fate of another.

In the context of old Jiko's practice of Zen Buddhism, the ability to "read" objects in this way takes on the form of rituals centered on gratitude and connection, and focused on exposing the arbitrary and false divide between self and other. Such rituals, then, would appear to lend themselves to Jiko's ease in border- and storyworld-crossing. Nao relates, somewhat amusedly, that much of the routines of temple life with Jiko involved thanking inanimate objects for their services. Nao writes, "I'm not kidding. They bowed

and thanked the toilet and offered a prayer to save all beings” (167). After telling Jiko that these uncommon rituals would certainly exacerbate her bullying at school, Jiko assured her that it was the appreciative connection to the objects, rather than the rituals themselves, that mattered. Nao thus observes that “it was okay just to feel grateful sometimes, even if you don’t say anything. Feeling is the important part. You don’t have to make a big deal about it” (167). Part of this gratitude stems from Jiko’s perception of the world as nondualistic; Nao affirms that this perspective is what Jiko refers to as “the not-two nature of existence” (194). Citing a typical conversation with her great-grandmother she had on the beach watching the waves, Nao recalls Jiko proclaiming, “Surfer, wave, same thing. . . Jiko, mountain, same thing. The mountain is tall and will live a long time. Jiko is small and will not live much longer. That is all” (194). This meditation on persons and things as being “not same. . . not different, either” (194) may very well be what allows Jiko to pass on her metaleptic supapawa to Ruth in the first place. Jiko is attuned to the fluidity of all boundary lines, including the ones that supposedly separate objects from people, and storyworlds across time and distance.

Puzzling over her newfound metaleptic abilities, Ruth remembers a quote from Dōgen, a medieval Japanese Buddhist Zen master cited by several characters in the novel (including Haruki #1, Nao, and Jiko herself): “*To forget the self is to be enlightened by all myriad things*. Mountains and rivers, grasses and trees, cows and cats and wolves and jellyfishes” (399). Ruth wonders, “Had Dōgen figured all this out?” (399). In fact, Dōgen would most likely characterize the connection between persons and artifacts in terms of *mujō seppō*, or what Fabio Rambelli translates as “the nonsentients preach the Dharma”

(48). The concept of *mujō seppō*, as Bernard Faure describes it, is the suggestion that natural things are “capable of preaching the Law to anyone who knows how to understand it” (193).¹⁰⁷ Thus, while in the tradition of nondualistic thinking, Dōgen and Jiko would consider the strict divide between object and subject to be arbitrary and misguided, the philosophy of *mujō seppō* suggests that nonsentient beings have a special capacity to teach us how to be in the world and interact with others, a quality that Ruth and Nao access in order to uncover their ethnic and cultural histories, as well as their philosophical and social connections to others.

Nao’s father, Haruki #2 or Harry, attempts to incorporate these beliefs into his programming work in Sunnyvale after learning that the U.S. military plans to appropriate his video gaming interface for training soldiers in the use of semi-autonomous weapons. Through researching Nao and her family, Ruth finds a psychology professor and friend of Nao’s father, Dr. Leistiko, who reveals that Harry’s propensity toward suicide is sparked in part by a failure to program what he comes to recognize as a “conscience,” a fail-safe provision he hoped to write into his software to remind soldiers of the potentially devastating consequences of their violent actions. Harry worries about his authorial and philosophical responsibilities to others should he exclude this measure, believing that the omission would unnecessarily cost many lives. Harry also spoke of his connection to his uncle, the kamikaze pilot Haruki #1, stating, “If my uncle’s plane had a conscience,

¹⁰⁷ It should be noted here that while Dōgen’s understanding of the phrase “nonsentient beings” includes our conventional understanding of the term—objects like trees, mountains, waves, etc.—translator Hubert Nearman points out that sentient beings “are those still wedded to their senses,” while nonsentient beings “refers to whatever exists just as it is” (653). Gudo Wafu Nishijima and Chodo Cross translate nonsentient into “non-emotional,” pointing out that Dōgen applied the word *mujō* (or nonsentient, non-emotional) in a way that “was wider than the usual usage” (155).

maybe he would not have done such a bombing. . . .¹⁰⁸ I know it is a stupid idea to design a weapon that will refuse to kill,’ he said. ‘But maybe I could make the killing not so much fun’” (309). Nao’s dad differentiates between conscience and shame, lamenting to Leistiko that “some Japanese politicians are always trying to change our children’s history textbooks so that these genocides and tortures [committed by the Japanese] are not taught to the next generation. By changing our history and our memory, they try to erase our shame” (308). He likens this dictatorial modification of history to a different kind of devastation, a shameful erasure of identity that Harry feels may explain his own perceived lack of a conscience in creating his program. The program he writes is thus part of a history of destructive rewriting, one that Harry fails to oppose when he is fired.

By potentially changing the narrative of Nao and Harry’s lives in Japan, Ruth’s metalepsis is her own attempt to collaboratively rewrite history. However, unlike the government’s erasure and denial of access to history or Harry’s flawed, conscience-less program, Ruth breaches storyworld borders to assert her own sense of self and, most significantly, to save lives. She knows that Nao and Harry’s happiness—and maybe even their attempts to commit or not commit suicide—depend in part on knowing the real circumstances surrounding Haruki #1’s own nationally mandated suicide, that Haruki in fact acted with agency by propelling his plane into the sea. In other words, Ruth realizes that the secret diary has the capacity to teach Nao and Harry something more about themselves and their history. The father and daughter’s discovery of Ruth’s gift has an added and unintended benefit, not only giving the two a project to collaborate on

¹⁰⁸ It should be noted that, at this point in the novel’s timeline, Harry and Nao have not yet discovered Haruki #1’s secret diary—ostensibly because Ruth has yet to place it in Jiko’s study.

together, but also bolstering Harry's courage to finally tell his daughter about the real grounds for his termination in Sunnyvale. He admits that his attempt to inflict his programming with a conscience, particularly in the shadow of 9/11, was the reason he, Nao, and her mother had to leave California. He laments, "A generation of young American pilots would use my interfaces to hunt and kill Afghani people and Iraqi people, too. This would be my fault. . . I knew the American pilots would suffer, too. . . That would also be my fault" (388). Rather than following his supervisor's orders to desist in his conscience research, Harry loses his job, forcing the family to move to Japan. For the first time in her life, Nao looks at her father and sees "a total superhero" (388). She adds, "My dad seems to have found his superpower, and maybe I've started to find mine, too, which is writing to you" (389). Just as Ruth inherits the watch from Nao, who in turn inherits it from Haruki #1 and then Jiko, Ruth finds herself the authorial beneficiary to Nao's recharged imaginative abilities.

Like memories in the gyre, stories become objects transmitted and shared in both novels. The notion of passing on stories, and of reusing and reimagining multiple other kinds of objects, actually appears and reappears in both Krauss and Ozeki's novels. Complementing George Weisz's reimagining of "recovered objects" and the multiple lives that the desk enjoys in *Great House*, Ozeki's text features several acts of reusing and reimagination—in a sense, of object recycling. Before her death from Alzheimer's, for example, Ruth's mother Masako enacts a curious reversal of fort-da with Ruth: Unbeknownst to her mother, Ruth returns and re-returns her mother's clothes to a recycling center store called The Free Store, where Masako delights in finding them

again and misrecognizing them as “new” clothes (222). Jiko has Nao wash and reuse plastic bags, characteristically explaining that sitting for meditation and washing freezer bags are the “same thing” (205). Finally, Harry recovers old magazines and manga out of recycling bins and recycles pages of his own philosophical reading into origami insects (79, 50, 133). Both texts further deal with characters whose own comprehension of who they are—in terms of their ethnic, cultural, and national identities, their shared histories, and the stories that shape their present—are a kind of recycling of what they once were. With Nao’s hopeful words of having found her strength in writing, Ruth’s own writer’s block is overcome. Reading the objects that she finds on the shore becomes a kind of authorial *supapawa* that she then passes on and recycles for the reader, giving the narrative new life beyond the page.

CHAPTER V

“A BLANK PAGE RISES UP”: EXPANDING THE SCALES OF TRANSETHNIC AUTHORSHIP IN PERCIVAL EVERETT’S *PERCIVAL EVERETT BY VIRGIL RUSSELL* AND MIGUEL SYJUCO’S *ILUSTRADO*

Henry James gave birth to the transnational characters in his novel, *The Ambassadors*, after hearing how his friend, William Dean Howells, addressed a younger colleague, Jonathan Sturges. Standing in James McNeill Whistler’s garden in Paris, Howells told Sturges, “Live all you can; it’s a mistake not to. It doesn’t so much matter what you do—but live” (Savu 192, Hocks 40-1). In his novel, James recreated and revised the intimate exchange as a speech imparted by his protagonist Lambert Strether to Little Bilham. “Don’t forget that you’re young—blessedly young; be glad on the contrary and live up to it,” Strether tells him. “It doesn’t so much matter what you do in particular, so long as you have your life” (176). These mirrored scenes—the fictional encounter and the real-life anecdote—reveal more about the speakers than they do about the listeners. In effect, a languishing but ardent older gentleman tells his younger companion that he has not lived his own life to its capacity, and urges his audience not to repeat his mistakes.

Echoes of that garden scene and what James calls “Strether’s irrepressible outbreak” (1) appear in both Miguel Syjuco’s *Ilustrado* and Percival Everett’s *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell* (hereafter referred to as *Virgil Russell*). However, rather than the ostensible privilege afforded to someone for whom “it doesn’t so much matter what you

do,” the wistful, even desperate messages conveyed by the paternal figures in both Everett and Syjuco’s novels are tempered with an awareness that, I propose, can be called transethnic. The father and son figures engage in collaborative forms of self-authorship on numerous scales—even working metafictionally with the reader—in order to underscore writers’ and readers’ shared project of defining the self. For instance, whereas Strether speaks to Bilham in order to inspire in the latter a sense of “innocent gaiety” (James 177), the dizzying narrative interactions between father and son in Everett’s novel are subdued by the pervading consciousness that one or the other character is facing an impending death or, in fact, may have already died. Paired with this melancholy realization is the understanding expressed by Ta-Nehisi Coates that, as African Americans, “acceptance depends not just on being twice as good but on being half as black” (79), and echoed in Kiese Laymon’s novel, *Long Division*, when the protagonist expresses this double standard as having to “run twice as fast to get half as far” (23).¹¹⁰ Everett’s paternal character appears to be thinking of this very problem when he describes a dream to his son that reads not unlike the jokes that Miguel and Crispin exchange in *Ilustrado*. In the dream, a white barkeep addresses two black customers with a racial slur. The father relates, “one of the men points to the other and says but he’s the president and the barkeep says that’s his problem” (3). In multiple exchanges like this one, the father and son engage in acts of intimate and responsive storytelling that complicate Strether’s admonition to embrace life, revealing material and cultural

¹¹⁰ For more on Laymon’s work, see the concluding chapter.

limitations that persist among African Americans who live in a supposedly accepting, multicultural society.

For Syjuco's Crispin Salvador, the idea he wishes to confer upon his young protégé—who I shall refer to as “Miguel” in order to differentiate him from the author Syjuco—is one that, like Krauss and Ozeki's novels, problematizes the sentiment of national belonging. Walking alongside the Hudson in Manhattan, Crispin tells Miguel that Filipino or “Pinoy” writers and their diasporic American counterparts have

written one book, and it's been re-bound again and again. So many representations of the war, the struggle of the haves and have-nots. . . All those Pinoy writers industriously criticizing. All those domestic dramas. Or the Filipino-Americans, eagerly roosting in pigeonholes, writing about the cultural losses that come with being raised in a foreign country, or being not only brown, but a woman, and a lesbian, or half-blind, or lower-middle-class, or whatever. Oh my, what a crime against humanity that the world doesn't read Filipino writing! This is the tradition you will inherit. (206)

In this lengthy passage, Crispin laments both the books that he in his advanced age will never write as well as the deteriorated state of a Filipino and Filipino American literature whose authors attempt to express both a colonial past and an oppressed present to an audience who does not read their works. Crispin and the unnamed father in Everett's novel view the inheritances they are to bestow in literary terms, focusing on how the stories that their young charges write can relate not only to ethnic American writing, but to literature in general.

The two older men also focus on squandered authorship and the blank pages that haunt them. For instance, Crispin regrets wasting his writing life trying to seal his immortality by making an impact on his potential readers. His work in progress, *The*

Bridges Ablaze—a novel he never finishes (at least, not within *Ilustrado*'s pages)—represents his “bargaining, begging, for just one last chance to bequeath a book about all the lessons I’ve learned painfully over the course of my life” (209). Meanwhile, the father in *Virgil Russell* attaches guilt and regret to his writing, which he began soon after the My Lai mass killings of the Vietnam War. He tells his son how, many decades later, he still remembers the images, voices, and words of the soldiers, “the way my heart broke, sank, collapsed, and the way it sounded so familiar, so much like white men in white hoods driving dirt roads and whistling through gap-toothed grins” (61). Haunted by the parallels of the massacres overseas and the hate crimes in his own country, he regrets not writing about the killings on either continent or even his “disdain for my lying, bombastic, self-righteous, conceited, small-minded, imperialistic homeland. Instead, I wrote about getting high... all of it a sad, juvenile metaphor about the lost American spirit, the mislaid, impoverished, misspent, misplaced, wasted, suffering American soul. . . The book was a success and I never published another word” (61-2). Like many facts the father and son exchange in Everett’s novel, this last detail incites revision: He clarifies that he did write other works but avoided publishing them, instead publishing pseudonymous popular genre fiction, texts that Crispin, facing a similar situation in *Ilustrado*, would have described as “full of prolificacy but lacking in gravitas” (Syjuco 12).¹¹¹ Never attaching his name to his work, the father in Everett’s novel insists that he does not look back on his writing career bitterly, but rather that he “found it a bit

¹¹¹ Dealing with both scathing censure and wide success with his political exposé, *Dahil Sa ‘Yo*, Syjuco’s Crispin Salvador turns to popular genre in his subsequent published texts and is widely successful in his crime novels and young adult fiction, much to the delicious ire of his literary critics.

amusing, ironic, ridiculous” (62). He thus characterizes most of his career as a lamentable avoidance of “real life” both on and off the page. While the writing he describes to his son is plentiful, each popular text and fake name highlights his inability to publish other works that illuminate his nation’s frequent multinational exercises of brutality against non-white people.

Whereas the father in Everett’s novel avoids attaching his name to his work, Miguel Syjuco and Percival Everett do the opposite in their novels: Like Foer and Ozeki’s novels discussed in previous chapters, Ishmael Reed’s *Japanese by Spring*, Salvador Plascencia’s *The People of Paper* Charles Yu’s *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe*, and other metafictional novels, Everett and Syjuco exhibit a radical self-referentiality, going so far as to include both their names and likenesses in their texts. Everett, in fact, has a history of self-referentiality in his oeuvre, verging in some aspects on autofiction, or a stylistic combination of autobiography and fiction.¹¹² His name makes its first titular appearance in his 2004 novel, *A History of the African American People (proposed) by Strom Thurmond as Told to Percival Everett and James Kincaid*, and a fictionalized version of Everett appears in both name and occupation in his 2009 novel, *I*

¹¹² Other contemporary popular and literary authors that also incorporate biographical names and likenesses into their work include Jonathan Ames, Paul Auster, Joan Didion, Sheila Heti, Stephen King, Mark Leyner, Kurt Vonnegut, and more. Andrew Bennett announces that “you could write a kind of history of European literature based on authors’ internal acts of naming,” and then proceeds to do just that in brief, starting with Hesiod’s *Theogony* and ending with Michael Ayres’ 2003 poem, “Transporter” (Bennett 121-123). While some critics suggest that autofiction began with Serge Doubrovsky’s description on the back cover of his 1977 novel *Fils*, A. Robert Lee attributes autofiction to Roland Barthes’ *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*, originally published in 1975. Lee describes this genre as “less the life than the *vraisemblance* of a life, a theatre of the self whose reflexive manoeuvres and play of mirrors help to give the more multi-aspected portrait. US ethnic autobiography, so-called” he adds, “cannot but also fall within these considerations yet always with any number of differences” (38).

am Not Sidney Poitier.¹¹³ In addition, various other aspects of his biography often appear in his works, such as his proclivity for fly fishing, guitar playing, and other personal hobbies, his love of ranch and desert environments of the American West, and his vocations as writer, professor (he is currently a Distinguished Professor of English at the University of Southern California), and even horse trainer, an occupation he took on in his youth. Similarly, in *Illustrado*, Syjuco includes a character Miguel who, like the author, is an expatriate writer born in the Philippines and living in the U.S. Also like Syjuco, Miguel becomes a father at a young age, is the son of an upper class political family and the sibling of two sisters and three brothers, and starts his writing career doing entry-level work for New York periodicals.

I argue that Everett and Syjuco's use of names and empirical details, as well as their attention to the Strether-like interactions these characters experience, challenge readers' and literary critics' understanding of authorial identity and multicultural American literature as constitutive of disparate groups and distinct "ethnic" content. In this way, these texts challenge the reality of fiction, but also the reality of ethnic identity as we know it. In their metafictional, self-referential, and autofictional natures, both novels create a heightened sense of reality, disorienting because they shatter conventions of fiction while simultaneously inciting readers to, for example, look up the frequent names, citations, and literary excerpts to confirm whether the fictional allusions are "real"

¹¹³ The paratext of *Not Sidney Poitier* includes the following opening disclaimer: "All characters depicted in this novel are completely fictitious, regardless of similarities to any extant parties and regardless of shared names. In fact, one might go as far as to say that any shared name is ample evidence that any fictitious character in this novel is NOT in any way a depiction of anyone living, dead, or imagined by anyone other than the author. This qualification applies, equally, to the character whose name is the same as the author's."

or not. The character Miguel hints at the reason for this hyperreality when describing how he and his girlfriend, Madison “referenced fictional characters as if they were people to learn from. . . . real-life people were too nebulous, too private and unreal for us to understand. We liked to believe there is an alternate world, a better world, populated entirely by characters created by the yearnings of humanity—governing and inspiring themselves with all the lucidity with which we *rendered* them” (31). The use of real-life details to describe the father-son-like relationships in these novels points to the possibilities for the kinds of alternative storyworlds that Miguel and Madison seek out, while also asking readers to keep one foot rooted in the “real” world in order to read for transethnic connections beyond the printed page. By drawing attention to the body of the biographical author, the texts force readers to confront the featured writers in each work—Everett’s father and son (Percivals Everett, Sr. and Jr.)¹¹⁴ and Syjuco’s Crispin and Miguel—and to consider their humanity alongside that of the authors themselves. More than just two-dimensional caricatures of ethnic Americanness, the writer-protagonists renegotiate their cultural identities with every newly disclosed writing project and narrative. The dramatized acts of writing—the myriad excerpts in *Ilustrado* and the collaborative undertakings in *Virgil Russell*—thus highlight how our identities are multiple and constantly constructed and reconstructed by language, while at the same time opening up questions of genre, suggesting that readers critically evaluate the

¹¹⁴ Leiding points out that the title invokes both the poet Virgil and the philosopher Bertrand Russell (60). Just as with characterization and narrative attribution, names in *Virgil Russell* are hard to pinpoint. Characteristic of this confusion, *Publishers Weekly* review of the novel lists the son’s name, oddly, as “Virgil” and says that the father and writer “may be named Percival Everett” (39). *PW* then goes on to note that the writer and storyteller may not be the father but the “guilt-ridden but loving son” (39). Given the biographical undertones of the novel, a much more probable scenario is that both narrators are named Percival Everett—with one being the senior and the other the junior.

categories in which these texts appear on bookstore shelves. Thus, these texts also contend with categories of ethnic American literature, asking readers to question what constitutes (or does not constitute), for example, Native American or Latino American fiction. The metafictional references to the author further allow for a discussion of aesthetic and cultural concerns paired with material and historical considerations. As mentioned in the introduction, whereas some critics like E. San Juan Jr. and Robert Young believe that postmodern and postcolonial literature privileges the aesthetic over the material, Syjuco and Everett invite open discussion of both aspects of literature with novels that are multimodal—employing white space, images, diverse typography, citations and allusions to both real and fictional texts, as well as a mixing of styles and genres.¹¹⁵

Most significantly, both novels further confuse the boundaries between writers in order to emphasize the dynamic qualities of ethnic American identity. “I’m an old man or his son writing an old man writing his son writing an old man,” Everett’s narrator writes. “But none of this matters and it wouldn’t matter if it did matter” (63). What matters, the novel suggests, are both the stories themselves and the way that knowing (or not knowing) the writers’ identities changes (or does not change) the narratives. *Virgil Russell* asks readers to follow the accounts of Murphy, Lang, the father plotting escape from an oppressive nursing home, and—at the novel’s conclusion—the father and son attempting to escape the members Ku Klux Klan, while at the same time prodding

¹¹⁵ Other examples of this subgenre of multimodal novels include Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves* and *Only Revolutions*, Foer’s *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*, Raymond Federman’s *Double or Nothing*, Lynda Barry’s *Cruddy*, and Salvador Plascencia *The People of Paper*.

readers to ponder whether the identity of the storytellers affect these stories at all. In a similar way, *Ilustrado* calls upon readers to question the very novel they have just completed when, in the epilogue, the “real” narrator reveals himself. Rather than Miguel investigating the murder of his mentor, Crispin Salvador, and attempting to find the latter’s lost novel *The Bridges Ablaze*, Crispin admits that *he* is the surviving author who has imagined and written down the experiences of a former student named Miguel, whose death affected him more than he believed possible. Contemplating his student’s premature passing, Crispin explains, “To make sense of what was happening to me, I obsessed on what had happened to him” (302). Thus focusing on the blurring of writerly identities, this chapter develops the fluidity of authorship to draw on what Wai-Chee Dimock calls “scale enlargement,” showing “an inverse correlation . . . between the magnitude of the scale and the robustness of distinctions. On a large enough canvas,” she specifies, “distinctions can become very unrobust indeed; they can lose their claim to visibility altogether” (*Through* 55). The fluctuating boundaries of the author further extend to the haziness of ethnic identity as it relates to borders—such as that the separating national from the local and transnational, and that separating the digital from the “real.” In fact, both texts work against what Ulrich Beck calls methodological nationalism, that is, the belief that “nation, state and society are the ‘natural’ social and political forms of the modern world” (Beck 18), the indistinctiveness from one author to the next instead making a case for collaboration and connectedness beyond such arbitrary divisions.

Underlying these mystifying uncertainties of the narrators is the presence of the empirical author in the not-so-camouflaged background, what Barthes calls the “Author-God” (128). Like the authorial narrator whom Frank addresses in Toni Morrison’s *Home*, versions of the real-life authors of *Virgil Russell* and *Illustrado* hover behind their creations. What, then, are we to make of these deliberate diffusions of the writer and the highlighting of storyworld layers between the reader and the author in these texts? I would suggest that both Everett and Syjuco provide an answer in their depictions of writing as collaboration. By presenting authorship as collaboration with co-authors on numerous scales both inside and outside the texts—incorporating even the readers themselves, the novels draw attention to writers’ and readers’ shared transethnic responsibility in defining and unearthing the fluidity of selfhood in ethnic American literature. “Anyway,” Crispin tells Miguel as he concludes his Jamesian speech, “your real home country will be that common ground your work plows between you and your reader” (208). For Syjuco, then, collaborative authorship exists in the “home country” of what I am calling the digital diaspora, a population dispersed—often both literally from its geographical homeland as well as figuratively, in the sense of communicating on the mukokuseki (“without nationality”) space of the internet.¹¹⁶ This group of people is nonetheless connected through literary interactions, showing on the one hand intimacy on a large scale, and on the other, personal relationships between reader and writer made multiple. *Illustrado* seeks out this digital diaspora for increased readership and political awareness, arguing that such is the only way to improve ethnic identification and self-

¹¹⁶ See the previous chapter, “‘Enlightened by All Myriad Things’: Material Metafiction in Nicole Krauss’s *Great House* and Ruth Ozeki’s *A Tale for the Time Being*” for more on the concept of mukokuseki.

fashioning in the United States, the Philippines, and beyond. At the same time, the novel presents this population as a way to expand the politics of authorship to include alternative spaces and different forms of expression, like blogs, comments on online posts, and jokes. Meanwhile, Everett's text depicts a close writing relationship between father and son in order to speak back to ethnic American, and specifically African American, literature, historiography, and criticism. Recognizing and then problematizing the inherent power in authorship, the narrator acknowledges, "This whole process of making a story, a story at all, well, it's the edge of something, isn't it? Forth and back and back of forth, it's a constant shuttle movement, ostensibly looking to comply with some logic, someone's logic, my logic, law, but subverting it the entire time" (38). The narrator, a role shared by multiple characters in the story, highlights collaborative storytelling as expanding the boundaries of communication and self-definition, while also problematizing the authority of any one person to dictate the parameters of that self-definition. The primary way that both Everett and Syjuco practice transethnicity, then, is by expanding the scales of metafictional authorship, by moving away from the common figure of the lone writer penning his work behind closed doors to instead depict storytelling and meaning-making as taking place on multiple levels of collaboration, intimacy, and critique.

"Our True Shared History": Jokes, Spam, and the Digital Diaspora in *Ilustrado*

History is being exchanged through modems. But it is just as quickly being absorbed, and from this process, a literary revolution will take root.
--Bino Realuyo, "'Am Here': Am I? (I, hope, so.)"

I want to stay as close to the edge as I can without going over. Out on the edge you can see all kinds of things you can't see from the center.
--Kurt Vonnegut, *Player Piano*

The collaborative impulse in *Illustrado* is most immediately evident in the text's structure: The novel opens in New York shortly after 9/11 with Miguel learning about the possibly suicidal drowning of his mentor and expatriate Philippine author, Crispin Salvador, and the émigré's now-missing manuscript for his novel, *The Bridges Ablaze*. However, what promises to be a mystery unraveling the circumstances of Crispin's death and the location of his missing last book turns out to be only part of the story. Instead, the deceptively linear beginning gives way to Crispin and Miguel's remembrances and experiences alongside excerpts of Crispin's prodigious work (which includes fiction, autobiography, travelogues, and a libretto), e-mails, blog posts, comments from chatty readers of the blogosphere, jokes, and Miguel's biography-in-progress about Crispin entitled *Eight Lives Lived*, which he anticipates will be "an indictment of my country, of time, of our forgetful, self-centered humanity" (32). Layers of fiction and non-fiction are also peppered throughout the text; beyond the obvious references to the novelist Syjuco, Crispin too writes characters into his intradiegetic novels whose names and likenesses are inspired by people in his life. For instance, his grandfather, Cristo, appears in his historical novel, *The Enlightened*, which also features a fictional version of Filipino nationalist revolutionary, José Rizal.¹¹⁷ Estranged from his daughter, Dulcinea, Crispin further creates a character named Dulcé, the spunky young protagonist of his *Kaputol*

¹¹⁷ For more on Rizal and his work, see the next section. The name Cristo may also be inspired by the character Crisóstomo, the protagonist of Rizal's novel *Noli Me Tangere*.

("Piece" or "Fragment") trilogy. Excerpts from these and other fictional novels litter and even crowd out Miguel's own narrative.

In fact, while fragmented literary texts can often confound readers, Miguel himself offers an implicit justification for his prose. Recalling the last time he saw his mentor, Miguel agonizes over what he should have done to prevent Crispin's death. "Should I have forced open the door? Slapped him twice across the face and demanded he tell me what was wrong?" he thinks. "Days, weeks later, all the fragments still would not click together. . . I could not understand why the world chose to take the easy way out: *to write him off simply*, then go home to watch TV shows with complicated plots. Maybe that's the habit of our age" (18, emphasis mine). A full life, Miguel suggests, requires a story that adequately reflects that complexity. As a product of numerous connections, events, and aspirations, our lives are worth the time and effort it takes to piece together the parts of ourselves that remain after we have vanished. Elizabeth Yuan notes that this fragmentation is actually evocative of "modern society [which] cobbles together its perception of reality through all kinds of means: multiple news outlets, Twitter, e-mails and text messages, blogs, message boards, jokes and rumors." *Ilustrado*, then, mimics the intricacy of human life and of modern society's forms of communication, demanding a "unit of research" that crosses conventional barriers between author and reader (Beck 25), including national borders and digital and physical spaces. Even as Miguel defends his choice of writing his mentor's biography to his girlfriend Madison, he simultaneously makes a case for why readers should take measures to comprehend narratives in their fragmented splendor.

Given the various parallels between Crispin and Miguel's lives, it would not be unreasonable for readers to wonder if one character inspired the creation of the other. For example, both protagonists have estranged daughters and come from well-off political families with many children. It is not a coincidence, too, that Miguel's first exposure to Salvador's writing is a short story whose protagonist is named Miguel (113). Actually, the fact that Crispin is the "real" narrator demands a re-reading of Miguel's first-person perspective alongside a vision of Crispin writing these accounts, expanding his and Miguel's interactions from "our classes, a few consultations in [his] office," and some "stilted conversations over cheeseburgers" into a warm, personal connection (301). Avoiding a linear sketch of the main characters, then, the text's polyvocality and fragmentation create an image of human connection best depicted transethnically through pastiche and agglomeration. The snippets of writing implore readers to capture an impression of both Miguel and Crispin from the novel's scattered pieces, thus sealing readers' necessary role in fulfilling the book's collaborative intent. This section looks at how these scattered passages—particularly the jokes and digital content like blogs and spam dispersed throughout the text—make a case for ethnic identity as forged in writer-reader relationships, where the structure of the telling is as significant as the content itself. By focusing on both the act and the content of writing, *Ilustrado* presents the most productive human connections as neither national nor global, but instead as existing between the writer and the reader.

By taking on the projects of writing Crispin's biography and finding Crispin's missing manuscript, Miguel's dual role as writer and reader awakens him to a new

framework of the self, one that exists neither in a national perspective nor in a wholly global mindset. Back in the birth country where he lost both his parents as a child, Miguel is adrift, suspended between feelings of national belonging that characterized his early years versus his recent breakup with Madison, a woman who represented the more cosmopolitan life he was leading in New York City, complete with debates “about which country we’d rescue an orphan from” (180). The sophistication Miguel attempts to pursue, then, is more than just a freedom of movement and familiarity with multiple countries and cultures, but a globalized vision of the way the world should be in terms of morality, economics, and culture. As Beck notes, shifting attention away from methodological nationalism does not equate to a proclamation of the end of the nation-state. Instead, as he describes of cosmopolitan sociological research, so, I argue, does Syjuco make a case for a methodological cosmopolitanism that “replaces the national” with other foci—in this case, the digital and the diasporic—while not dismissing the power of the local and the national to influence global trends and movements (Beck 25). “The national space becomes a highly complex ‘showcase of the global,’” Beck explains, particularly in terms of planetary issues like inequality and climate change. He continues, “Precisely because of the interconnectedness of the world many things begin locally, even if on occasion in unlocalized closeness. Thus it is neither national nor global, but cosmopolitan” (29).

Thus, even during awkward reunions with old friends in Manila, Miguel is preoccupied with reminiscences of Madison on the one hand and, on the other, the pre-pubescent childhood that he refers to as “my days” (84) and the disorder that follows: his

grandfather's chaotic entry into his politics, his older sister leaving him when he was 13, and many of the same kinds of "broad themes" that Crispin describes in his memoir—"enigmas, dreams, mythologies, the tyranny of absence, the shortcomings of language, deciduous memories, endings as beginnings" (47). Miguel's retreat into Crispin's world and writing, then, circumvents his own spatial and temporal disorientation by forging new ground in the "real home country" that Crispin promised him is found in the reader-writer relationship.

The structure of the text bears evidence to this retreat; the primary level of the story—that of Miguel returning to the Philippines to complete his work related to Crispin—is constantly interrupted by Crispin's vast oeuvre of writing. Similarly, as Miguel's bond with Madison disintegrates, she complains with growing resentment of "[a]ll that time you spend in the library. With the memory of your dead friend" (146). Though Miguel's response to Madison—that a "Dead Crispin's better than a living you" (146)—is meant to further distance himself from her, the comment also affirms the reader-writer relationship's ability to surpass barriers of time and space, an appealing prospect for the unsettled Miguel. Crispin's supposed death in the novel's opening pages—from a drowning in the Hudson River shortly after 9/11—highlights the changeable nature of selfhood in the post-9/11 era and the increasingly regimented boundaries of which ethnicities and "ethnic" behaviors and appearances are considered "American." At the same time, Philippine borders are more diffuse than ever, the republic now largely made up of emigrants and overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) whose migrant remittances—primarily from Filipina women separated from their families—are a major

part of the country's gross domestic product (Ball 130, 136).¹¹⁸ Crispin's "real home country" is thus represented in Syjuco's text by collaborative acts of authorship made multiple.

An example of this fecundity lies in jokes, which Crispin insists are the only "true shared history" of Filipino- and English-speaking populations (35). Likening them to proverbs, Crispin adds that, without jokes, "we wouldn't understand ourselves" (36). Therefore, while Miguel thinks the comical narratives might be "divisive," Crispin insists that they can also be "unifying" (36). Observing the recurrences and patterns of jokes used in Filipino and Filipino American online newsgroup forums, Emily Noelle Ignacio points out that users told jokes "because the participants were forced to situate themselves and their local problems within the context of larger, global patterns" (132). Hence, Miguel may be right that the substance of jokes, or the "joke text" (Leveen 31), sometimes determines membership and inclusion—that is, those who "get" the joke belong to the "in" crowd. At the same time, the actual process of telling the joke, what Lois Leveen distinguishes as the "joke act" (31), can become an intimate and unifying point of connection across time and space, a way to tell ourselves about ourselves.

The actual content of Crispin and Miguel's jokes involves a running series of anecdotes about a hapless character named Erning Isip, his wife Rocky Bastos, and their growing family, whose adventures allow the two writers to understand their shared

¹¹⁸ Rochelle Ball notes that the Philippines may well be the largest migrant nation in the world with Filipinos living and working in over 180 countries (115). She adds, "No longer conceived predominately in terms of economic growth generated by production and labour within the Philippines, now hopes about household, regional and national growth and national survival are firmly pinned on labour export and labouring overseas" (135), directly affecting family life, the make-up of the educational system, women's safety and human rights, as well as international relations.

cultural history, but also the way that national and ethnic identity has transformed from having more rigid boundaries to becoming more fluid and global in both positive and debilitating ways. In an interview via his publisher Picador, Syjuco responds to the commingling of fact and fiction in his novel by stating that, to him, “the most true-to-life characters in my book are Boy Bastos and his father, Erning Isip.”¹¹⁹ The stories of the Isip-Bastos clan incorporate puns and other wordplay, popular references, and narratives often recycled and/or rewritten from commonplace anecdotes from the Philippines, the United States, and the global marketplace. Intriguingly, aspects of the family’s narrative trajectory are similar to Miguel’s. Isip’s life begins in a substantially class-minded society that mimics much of Miguel’s early experiences growing up with his grandparents, and ends in a world of corrupt politics that is not unlike the basis for Miguel’s disillusionment with and subsequent estrangement from his family and his home country, not to mention his involvement with the like-minded Madison and their adoption of a cosmopolitan lifestyle.

Isip at first appears in the text as a yokel, with the jokes calling to mind a famous Filipino American comedian Rex Navarrete, who Sarita See observes as “establishing the authentic pinoy” (or Filipino person) by relying “on caricature that mostly has to do with class distinctions” (87). In fact, one might refer to Isip in a derogatory sense as being “bakya,” a word that literally refers to the wooden clogs commonly worn by Filipinos before rubber flip-flops or sandals became more prominent. Figuratively, the word

¹¹⁹ The interview itself masquerades as both a legitimate article and a metaleptic joke: Syjuco’s interviewer is identified as a fictional character from *Ilustrado*, the critic Marcel Avellaneda. The interview supposedly appeared first on Avellaneda’s blog, *The Burley Raconteur*.

“bakya” suggests one who is provincial, in both the connotation of being unsophisticated and old-fashioned as well as being from the province or countryside. The person who is seen as bakya is what Vicente Rafael describes as “a failed version of the urban elite. . . stranded between aesthetic sensibilities and geographies, and by extension linguistic registers, without the means with which to represent that predicament” (173). Echoing the divisions that separated Rizal and the rest of his educated ilustrado class from their non-European-educated counterparts, then, the early jokes about Isip mostly concern his social ineptness as a result of his poor upbringing and his attendance at the “populist” AMA Computer College instead of one of the more prestigious Philippine universities (36, 50).

In the first joke that Miguel and Crispin exchange, Isip’s two elite compatriots attempt to get the attention of a beautiful woman by exhibiting their class status, which involves showing off their possessions as well as speaking in Taglish, a combination of English and the main Filipino dialect of Tagalog. Upon Isip’s turn to speak to the woman, he looks at her fair skin in confusion and says, “Miss, please miss, give me autograph?” (36). Isip’s association of white skin with celebrity is not so far-fetched given that both United States and Filipino celebrity culture is disproportionately populated with fairer-skinned people who fit Western standards of beauty. In addition, the displays of material wealth and the deployment of Taglish by Isip’s more privileged counterparts—like the Ateneo de Manila University student who tells the woman, “Wow, you’re so talagang [really] pretty, as in totally ganda [beautiful] gorgeous!” (36)—not only underscores their superior education, but further reveals their confidence in future engagement in the global

marketplace, what Rafael calls the freedom to “mov[e] between languages and identities without fully surrendering to any one of them” (173).

Comparing Isip’s encounter with the fair-skinned woman to one of Miguel and Crispin’s later jokes about Isip’s granddaughter, Girly, reveals that the two writers are in commiseration over the Philippines’ increased globalization since the days of Erning Isip. Suggestive of this newly cosmopolitan population, Girly’s two friends—an English-speaking girl from the International School Manila and a Filipina who attends a private Catholic college, St. Scholastica—are well-educated, bilingual, and high class, but come from different cultural and economic mindsets. Seeing a large lizard, the three girls shriek. The first, from the International School, refers to the creature in fluent English as an iguana, while the St. Scholastica student screams in Tagalog that it is a “butiki” (267), meaning house lizard or gecko. Isip’s granddaughter, however, screeches out the one thing that the lizard calls to her mind—namely, Lacoste, the French clothing brand known for polo shirts that feature a crocodile as its logo. Girly, the legacy of Isip’s bakya upbringing, is shallow, commercially-minded, and, as revealed in the final joke that Crispin later tells Miguel, destined for a life of politics. Her eventual married name, Girly Bastos-Arrayko, is a barely-disguised reference to Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, who was the President of the Philippines from 2001 to 2010.¹²⁰

Both *Ilustrado*’s political reference and the joke itself are more easily recognizable in the digital age than their historical equivalents would have been during the time of the original ilustrados. The growing accessibility of political information and

¹²⁰ Incidentally, the word “bastos” translates to rude, course, or indecent, whereas “Arrayko” refers to “aray ko!”, an expression that basically translates to “Ouch!”

jokes on the internet means that Filipinos and Filipino Americans have more opportunities to remain engaged with each other in order to shape an understanding of ethnic connectivity in both countries. In contrast to the ubiquitous participation of Filipino Americans on the internet, Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* envisions a fantasy of disappearance: Harry manages to "erase" Nao from the internet even as Ruth tries to discover her. Ruth's facility in finding Nao anyway—via her magical metalepsis—not only point to the impossibility of disappearance in the internet age, but also suggests an argument against such a retreat in place of a collaborative space to define selfhood. Joining in the mutual joke-telling on the internet, for instance, Ignacio found that jokes provided "alternative ways of thinking about culture—as an active articulation and enfolding of issues that pertain to ourselves and others in the diaspora. Through these jokes we learned how members of the diaspora turned (albeit temporarily) the impact of colonialism and globalization on its head" (133). Jokes, then, promote interactive authorship, and the digital medium in which such jokes are increasingly told and retold allows these writing relationships to occupy multiple spaces. Highlighting the differences between joke-telling and the acts more commonly associated with authorship such as writing a novel, Leveen makes a case for jokes as democratized writing, stating that they are regularly "'re-authored' by new tellers; as soon as a joke act is completed, the joke text belongs equally to the teller and to those who have just heard it. . . . In retelling the joke, the joke teller is rewriting the text and re-authoring the characteristics of the intended audience" (31). Jokes as egalitarian forums for self-expression are bolstered by the relatively democratic access that many have to the internet in the first place,

particularly when compared to world travel and participation in the global corporate marketplace.

The novel hints both at the epilogue's final disclosure and at the connections possible in digital form when Miguel finds evidence early in the text that his mentor might still be alive: Nine months after Crispin Salvador's death, Miguel receives an e-mail that begins, "Dear Sire/Madame . . . I was informed by our lawyer, Clupea Rubra, that my daddy, who at the time was government whistleblower and head of family fortune, called him, Clupea Rubra, and conducted round his flat and show to him three black cardboard boxes" (18-19). While the opening sentences of this e-mail have all the appearances of spam, unbeknownst to Miguel, the black boxes foreshadow a moment in the novel's conclusion when Miguel finds neither Dulcinea nor Crispin's last novel, but instead a room with three empty cardboard boxes. (The conclusion will be discussed in more detail in the subsequent section.) More notable to Miguel at this stage is that the e-mail ends, "More information TBA" (19)—a possible reference to Crispin's missing novel, *The Bridges Ablaze*—and that it is sent by `crispin1037@elsalvador.gob.sv`. Significantly, the moment that inspires Miguel to buy his plane ticket to the Philippines and to investigate his mentor's life and writing is in essence junk mail that may also be Crispin's idea of a joke.

The joke occurs via a commonly ignored and lambasted space of writing on the internet—the ubiquitous spam message, an appropriate genre given Crispin's own reception in the Philippines as a writer of "junk" or "garbage," but also a space in which authorship is deliberately blurred or obscured. In fact, several other examples of spam

appear in *Ilustrado*, mostly in response to literary critic Marcel Avellaneda's blog posts. While Avellaneda—an old and estranged friend of Crispin's—publishes scathing reviews of his former comrade's work and tongue-wagging accounts of his run-ins with the literary intelligentsia, his blog entitled *The Burley Raconteur* usually delivers sardonic reports of politics gone wrong. One post pokes fun at fictional President Estregan's twelfth failed attempt to lead his Unanimity Party in a processional walk. Avellaneda gleefully recounts, "Politicians and dignitaries waited for rain to subside while photographers snapped them yawning, texting, picking their teeth, and looking at the sky. . . [W]hile the President's national Unanimity party does include powerful lackeys and cronies, even God and Mother Nature have cast their lot with members of GLOO" or the "GLorious OppOsition party" fighting the president and his policies (77). Typical of Avellaneda's posts, the account calls out the irony of a political party named Unanimity, whose robust and vocal opposition is anything but undivided. Following a link to the "funny, unauthorized photographs of pols milling about looking at rain clouds in Bayani-ako's [blog] *Bayan Bayani*" (78) are numerous reactions to Avellaneda's post, representing some of the writerly interactions the internet fosters. Among the responses in acclamation of Avellaneda or Estregan's positions are a dismissive comment that the blog is "wasting ur time" (78), unfounded concern that GLOO leader Senator Nuredin Bansamoro is an extremist Muslim, talk of a scandal involving Estregan and celebrity starlet Vita Nova, and a spam post repeated four times. The spammer, identified by the pseudonym Paulo Javier, asks readers to "Buy cellphones at CellShocked.com.ph!" (78), promising that each unlocked phone includes a free "Authentic Louis Vuitton reprod belt

case” (78). While the source of spam comments like this are often automated systems, a couple of commenters indirectly respond to “Paulo”: one to offer his services to remove Avellaneda’s spam, and another to warn that the Louis Vuitton reproductions are cheap plastic.

The sheer persistence of this commercialized post in juxtaposition with the other largely inane responses to Avellaneda’s blog epitomizes the digital diaspora at its most precarious. Though Avellaneda promises his readers that the issue with the spam has been fixed, the CellShocked post reappears again at the end of the comments, offering the final and definitive word on Avellaneda’s criticisms. On the one hand, *Ilustrado* suggests that the internet can provide a space for writers of all backgrounds and nationalities to connect with each other, to shape and redefine ethnicity, to share jokes, and even to improve the lives of those living under oppressive political and cultural systems. In its place, however, the persistence of the CellShocked advertisement warns that such possibilities can be easily squandered in the name of materialism and the accumulation of wealth, as well as the accompanying belief that luxury must originate in the United States and Europe (Louis Vuitton is, like Girly Bastos’s crocodilian Lacoste, based in France). The unlocked communication and authentic reproductions that “Paulo” offers thus invoke both the corrupt politics of Filipino government officials secretly accumulating wealth and extravagance in the face of their people’s poverty, as well as Filipino and Filipino Americans’ privileging of Western economic and cultural ideas on class status and identity. As the character, Sadie, says to Miguel regarding a story about Colorado snowboard instructors, “Call me colonial, but I’m all about it” (178). Her captivation with

U.S. elite white culture recalls Dylan Rodriguez's argument that Filipinos and especially Filipino Americans are continuously regarding themselves in relation to what he refers to as "arrested raciality": a state of constant dispute with colonial, white supremacist beliefs that these groups are incapable of self-governance due to their race and history. As a result of racial affectability, the subjects, who Rodriguez argues are primarily the "Philippine petite bourgeoisie and 'Filipino American' professional class" (151), are compelled to uphold what he calls the "local and global political logics of the contemporary U.S. nation-building project" (34). For Rodriguez, then, the digital diaspora is itself "cellshocked," experiencing a perpetual disruption of the self as a result of prolonged exposure—exacerbated by access to digital media—to commercialized globalization and cultural "coca-colonization" (Rowe 28; Hannerz 217).

Syjuco, however, is not as quick as Rodriguez to dismiss the possibilities of authoring and shaping Filipino and Filipino American ethnic connection in the digital age. Discussing the storytelling possibilities of web 2.0 contexts like social networks and blogs, Ruth Page notes the collaborative forums are sites "clearly embedded in a participatory culture which weaves together channels of text and dialogue in multiple configurations" (208). She adds that digital spaces allow for more conversational and intimate exchanges, noting, "The affordances of computer mediated communication thus blend the written mode with the conversational style and near instantaneous responsiveness characteristic of oral discourse," what she calls "'spoken-written' qualities of online discourse" (Page 209). The jokes that Crispin and Miguel exchange in oral, handwritten, and digital forms exemplify the many patterns that Page highlights,

showing the participatory nature of jokes that have evolved and shifted over time and geographical distances, not to mention the transethnic connections forged through the composing of those jokes. The plight of Erning Isip and his descendants is not optimistic given that the family's shining legacy—its punch line—is the materialistic, politically corrupt Girly Bastos-Arrayko, a woman who could certainly afford several genuine Louis Vuitton cases instead of resorting to “authentic” reproductions. Nonetheless, Miguel and Crispin's shaping of the Isip-Bastos storyline and the writerly exchanges they share both in person and in digital spaces points to the power of storytelling, even in the most seemingly frivolous form of the joke.

It is therefore not a coincidence that the one of the earliest jokes in *Ilustrado* is the ambiguously-worded broken English of the spam e-mail that Miguel receives from `crispin1037@elsalvador.gob.sv`. The jokester and sender of the scam e-mail—the son of the deceased client of the lawyer Clupea Rubra—is embroiled in a political dilemma, not unlike Crispin himself. The son's father was killed for exposing government indecencies, and the spammer has been subsequently harassed and molested. E-mails like this one often begin with promises of sincerity and trustworthiness before soliciting personal information or cash. While discerning recipients often designate such e-mails as “junk,” Miguel hesitates to do so in part because the curiously named `crispin1037` does not ask for monetary remittances or personal information. Instead the e-mail concludes, “Your heroic assist is required in replenishing my father's legacy and masticating his despicable murderers” (19). Crispin, Miguel's literary father figure, is enlisting Miguel as the novel's protagonist: to be a hero, to find his writerly legacy, to connect with his past, and

to avenge his own mysterious death. Ultimately, as revealed in *Ilustrado*'s epilogue, the question brought out by the spam e-mail—that is, whether Crispin is alive, murdered, or a suicide victim—is not the text's main concern at all. In this way, Clupea Rubra gets his last laugh in the novel's conclusion, revealing that his name, which translates to “Red Herring,” holds true. The contribution solicited by the spammer is an authorial rather than a monetary one. The missing manuscript has yet to be written, and it is only with the “heroic assist” of the digital diaspora that the blank pages will be filled.

The New Ilustrados

It is not unusual that Isip's granddaughter Girly Bastos-Arrayko, the punch line of Crispin's final joke to Miguel, is associated with Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, president of the Philippines at the time that Syjuco was writing *Ilustrado*. While Syjuco links his fictional President Estregan more closely to the dictator Ferdinand Marcos and former Philippine presidents Fidel V. Ramos and Joseph Estrada than he does Arroyo,¹²¹ *Ilustrado* nevertheless argues that the digital diaspora's access to open and direct communication creates a vital opportunity to critique national government policies and practices, particularly those which limit self-expression. Applying similar logic over a hundred years before *Ilustrado*, a member of the original 19th-century ilustrado group, Rizal, wrote in *The Philippines: A Century Hence* that disunity and feuding among provinces was more likely to occur back when communication and movement between

¹²¹ Referring to Marcos, Ramos, and Estrada, Syjuco says in an interview with Elizabeth Yuan that the character Estregan is “all of those and none of them” at the same time. Meanwhile, his father, Augusto Syjuco Jr. worked in Arroyo's cabinet and served two terms in a congressional seat in the province of Iloilo. In a move common of dynastic Philippine politics, that same position is now currently held by his mother, Judy Syjuco.

islands was uncommon. However, with innovative access to “steamers” and “telegraph-lines,” Rizal hoped that “communication and exchange of impressions [would] naturally increase,” allowing many to realize that they are “threatened by the same peril and wounded in the same feelings, [and thus should] clasp hands and make a common cause” (61). In other words, Rizal believed that augmented access to better communication would allow more meaningful interpersonal collaborations and wider understanding of shared histories and beliefs.

Rizal further felt that this enhanced network would lead to better government practices. “It is true,” he admits, referring to the Philippine government in the early 1900s, “that the union is not yet wholly perfected, but to this end tend the measures of *good* government. . . The Islands cannot remain in the condition they are without requiring from the sovereign country more liberty. *Mutandis mutandis*. For new man, a new social order” (61-2, emphasis his). But does this increased liberty in policy and communications create better government? After all, even Miguel’s death by drowning in flooded street waters (described by Crispin in the novel’s epilogue) could be perceived as a consequence of the government’s unwillingness to care for its people: The poor often steal and resell manhole covers to make ends meet, thus making flooded streets even more dangerous than normal, particularly in urban areas of the Philippines. Miguel’s hapless drowning while attempting to save two poor children stranded in the rising floodwaters might not have happened had the government attended to such conditions. Nevertheless, both Miguel and Crispin have confidence that the written word will improve our ability to shape our interactions with each other and our ways of being in the

world. We make our governments just as we do our cultural beliefs, they insist, and authorship—in all its configurations—is central in accomplishing this rewriting of our ethnic, historical, and national connections. In fact, as I argue in this section, *Ilustrado* calls attention to comparisons between Rizal’s ilustrado compatriots from the late 19th and early 20th century and today’s digital diaspora—including the empirical author Syjuco himself—in order to make a case for using writing to its full force: Crispin and Miguel’s attitude toward literature suggests that, rather than squandering the opportunities that our increased lines of communication have opened for us, readers and writers—fictional or otherwise—should mobilize authorship with the intention of analyzing and deconstructing governmentally sanctioned divisions between races, classes, nations, and ethnicities.

In fact, one of Crispin’s works, entitled *The Enlightened*, could be another version of *Ilustrado*, which in the major Filipino language of Tagalog can be translated to mean the cultured, the educated, or the enlightened. The text’s doubled titles, Syjuco’s real-life *Ilustrado* and Crispin Salvador’s intradiegetic *The Enlightened*, spotlight a historical juxtaposition of the writerly Filipino ilustrados of the late 1800s with today’s more multinational and economically diverse population.¹²² Originally, the ilustrados were the group of middle- and primarily upper-class Filipino males who were mostly educated abroad (usually at universities in Madrid or Barcelona) or at the University of Santo

¹²² Significantly, *Ilustrado* notes that *The Enlightened* was “released in the United States [and] won prizes before it was published but could not live up to the fairy-tale hype” (8). The context for the text’s publication mirrors that of *Ilustrado*, which was awarded the Man Asian literary prize while it was still an unedited manuscript not attached to any publisher, all of which Syjuco has mentioned in multiple interviews as being both incredible and daunting.

Tomas in Manila during the later Spanish colonial period.¹²³ These ilustrados were most notably a literate and literary class: In addition to artwork, the products of their many anti-colonial efforts include Rizal's *Noli Me Tángere* (*Touch Me Not*, 1887) and *El Filibusterismo* (*The Filibustering* or *The Subversive*, 1891),¹²⁴ and numerous other novels, poems, speeches, essays, and articles. Emphasizing their literary innovations, Raquel Reyes notes that the ilustrado “propagandists were the first to craft a specific nationalist vocabulary and to create a body of work that signaled, for the first time, a self-conscious effort to speak of a common heritage and a common destiny, to depict a particular, authentic and recognizably Filipino character and identity” (xx). This nationalist sentiment—brought on in part as a reaction to Spanish colonization—shifts its focus in Syjuco’s text to the digital diaspora, a dispersed population informed by multiple cultural, economic, national, and ethnic influences. United by their authorial interactions, they have become, in a way, the new ilustrados.

¹²³ Most descriptions of the class that make up the ilustrados uses the phrase “Filipino elite,” though Michael Cullinane points out that the designation refers not just to those with land holdings in provinces and/or urban areas, but also to ethnic origin (like creoles and mestizos, particularly Filipinos of Chinese descent), holding of political office, and education. In total, these categories amounted to about 10% of the Filipinos at the end of the 19th century (Cullinane 9, 19). Ilustrados often fit multiple categories connecting them to elite status, though Cullinane notes that the term itself refers to “advanced education and learning and does not specify socioeconomic origins” (26). Further, not all ilustrados were from wealthy families (an example would be Apolinario Mabini, an ilustrado whose family was of the laboring class), nor were all educated Filipinos deemed ilustrados.

¹²⁴ Some early translations of *Noli Me Tángere* are published as *An Eagle Flight* (New York: McClure, Phillips & Co., 1901) and *The Social Cancer* (Manila: Philippine Education Company & New York: World Book, 1912), while *El Filibusterismo* is sometimes published in English as *The Reign of Greed* (Manila: Philippine Education Company, 1912; both *Reign* and *Social Cancer* were translated by Charles Derbyshire). Rizal notes in a letter to artist Felix Resurreccion Hidalgo that the title, *Noli Me Tángere*, is a biblical reference (Agoncillo 139; this is most likely the verse in John 20 that begins, “Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father.”) David J. Silbey omits any mention of the biblical reference and instead credits the United States with Rizal’s title, stating that the phrase is an appropriation of the American revolutionary slogan, thus translating *Noli Me Tángere*, somewhat clumsily, to “Don’t Mess with Me” (12). Other critics point to the ophthalmological reference of *Noli* as the name these doctors gave to cancer of the eyelids (Rizal himself was an ophthalmologist by trade). Dominique Blumenstihl-Roth’s *José Rizal, Don Quichotte des Philippines* (Damville, France: Peleman, 2010) adds that the title might also refer to the name of a reclusive type of balsam flower.

The connection between the historic and new ilustrados is most evident in their writings. Often influenced by American and European ideals and even, Megan Thomas suggests, European Orientalism and American racial sciences of the 19th century (3),¹²⁵ the early ilustrados produced a multitude of written documents that sought to defend their sovereignty and to define their national and ethnic identities. Thus they wrote, retrieved, and revised the narratives of their people separate from their colonization, generating a prolific body of writings that detailed the people's shared and separate histories and pre-histories, languages, and traditions. The ilustrados also wrote pieces on policy and politics and published their own propaganda and newspapers, including the famous *La Solidaridad* published in Barcelona and Madrid. More relevant to this chapter, recent critics have sought to better understand the nuances of the ilustrados' body of work through their biographies. While it is tempting to read the ilustrado writings as a case for national sovereignty and revolution in the face of Spanish colonization,¹²⁶ reading the biographical lives of the authors alongside their work reveals that the arguments they made were far more nuanced and that their interests extended far beyond Spain or even Europe in general.¹²⁷

¹²⁵ For more on the connection between 19th-century ilustrado tenets and race, see Aguilar.

¹²⁶ See Schumacher for an example of such an argument.

¹²⁷ For instance, highlighting scholarship by Benedict Anderson and Resil B. Mojares, Thomas points out that, in opposition to approaches emphasizing revolution, the biographical readings accomplished by these critics "reveal the surprising connections and creations possible among those who travel between and among peripheries and centers, intellectual traditions, and political strategies and visions" (15). Moving away from Anderson, Mojares, and Thomas's focus on the scholarly writings of the ilustrado class, Reyes returns to the propagandist and political writings of the group while nonetheless highlighting biographical aspects in order to complicate the gender-related assumptions previously made about the educated group of males.

Even members of the ilustrado class themselves recognized the lines between biography and fiction as imprecise, calling for the kind of multiplicity of authorship that comes to characterize Syjuco's transethnic work. While *Noli Me Tángere* is fictional in form, Rizal insisted that events and characters were drawn from real-life observation. In a letter to the painter Felix Hidalgo, Rizal explained that through his novel, he "endeavored to answer the calumnies which for centuries had been heaped on us and our country; I have described the social condition, the life, our beliefs, our hopes, our desires, our grievances, our griefs. . . The facts I narrate are all true and actually happened; I can prove them" (qtd. in Agoncillo 140). Therefore, as Teodoro Agoncillo insists, Rizal's "book is a novel only in the sense that the technique employed by the author is that of fiction" (139); Rizal sought to use the form to emphasize the reality of the conditions he and his fellow countrymen experienced.

A similar situation exists in *Ilustrado*, except that instead of pointing out the injustice of excluding others from ideals like nationalism and sovereignty, Syjuco's novel argues that Filipino American ethnicity can incorporate even those with no traditional or natal ties to the Philippines as home country. The scale of what counts as "Filipino American" in *Ilustrado* shifts outward to encompass those whose connections to each other are virtual, as well as inward to comprise the "real home country" (208)—that is, the reader-writer relationship. Incorporating knowledge of the biographical author expands this scale even further. For example, whereas Crispin and Miguel are squarely presented as Filipino Americans based in New York and occasionally criticizing Philippine politics from afar, Syjuco himself is far more multinational, living in various

countries as well as writing most of *Ilustrado* in New York and Montreal, thus making Eleanor Ty's term of "Asian North American" more applicable.¹²⁸

The fictional Miguel too becomes a kind of world traveler, finding himself in the final chapter flying above a set of unnamed islands, suspended in both the narrative and in space, and then landing in a kind of ghostly, metaphysical locale: an island shack "where the beginning and end circle to meet" (299). Providing several possible endings for Miguel's character and also disclosing the details of Miguel's death, Crispin can be said in the epilogue to bring Miguel down to earth while also leaving him deliberately adrift. Juxtaposing Syjuco's real-life biography against the fictional characterizations of Miguel and Crispin, then, adds a more global perspective to the unhomeliness that Miguel feels during his investigations into Crispin's death and his search for the missing manuscript in the Philippines, which culminates in this room with its empty boxes. The digital diaspora provides the ultimate challenge to authenticity by posing one's "real" home country not as the home country of one's ancestors, or even the country in which the new generations now live. Instead, removed from such limitations, the fluidity of authorship and the creative interactions found online and through other venues of collaborative writing—that is, through other suspended spaces—provide another way to define ethnic identity.

In the world of *Ilustrado*, Rizal and Miguel's worlds meet most prominently in moments when characters are defending individual rights and expression in the face of

¹²⁸ The cosmopolitan Syjuco earned his Bachelor's in Manila, his Master's in New York, and his PhD in Adelaide, not to mention residential writing fellowships from countries including Singapore. For more on the term "Asian North American," see Ty's *Unfastened: Globality and Asian North American Narratives*.

domestic or foreign governments. Crispin relates how, in January 1970, the pregnant poet Mutya Dimatahimik laid down in front of a tank that was going to stop protesters from besieging the presidential Malacañang Palace.¹²⁹ When later questioned of the reason behind her bravery, Mutya relates her memory of Rizal's dedication in *Noli Me Tangere*. His words, written in 1886 and dedicated "To My Fatherland," places Spanish colonization of the Philippines alongside other "human sufferings" in history, and concludes, "I will strive to reproduce thy condition faithfully, without discriminations; I will raise a part of the veil that covers the evil, sacrificing to truth everything, even vanity itself, since, as thy son, I am conscious that I also suffer from thy defects and weaknesses." Rizal thus situates his own writing as an exposé beholden to what he calls "truth," with the understanding that his words might not be readily welcomed. Both thrilled and horrified by his memory of Mutya's audacity, Crispin opines, "And yet, 'No lyric has ever stopped a tank,' so said Seamus Heaney. Auden said that 'poetry makes nothing happen.' Bullshit! I reject all that wholeheartedly! What do they know about the mechanics of tanks? How can anyone estimate the ballistic qualities of words?" (205). The ballistic power of words is why *Ilustrado* calls on the digital diaspora to continue reading and writing Philippine and Philippine American literature in multiple forms and genres, despite the danger of disinterest or critical opposition.

¹²⁹ Several characters in the novel discuss rumors that Dimatahimik is the reason for Avellaneda and Crispin's estrangement from each other, though *Ilustrado* never confirms whether this is actually the case. Her first name Mutya can be more or less translated to Pearl or Talisman, while her surname—which invokes the phrase "hindi matahimik" or "not serene"—suggests a refusal of complacency, quite appropriate in this anecdote of her being moved to stand before a moving tank. A journalist, she is later stabbed outside of her office building during the Marcos dictatorship (163). Crispin, who started out as a journalist, suggests that journalists may be the world's only truly effective writers (166, 231, 240-1).

The novel suggests that part of the opposition to acquiring crucial works of literature comes from members of the digital diaspora themselves. While this educated, transnational class of new ilustrados has the opportunity to “sacrifice to the truth everything” on an even broader and wider scale than Rizal, *Ilustrado* instead shows in their criticism of literature the ways that this open access falls prey to the same kinds of ossified categorizations that characterize much of American multiculturalism. On Crispin’s work, for example, Miguel’s friend explains to him, “We just wanted the most visible Filipino writer in the world to be more authentically Filipino” (163). Later another friend says that one of his novels is “too Manila-centric” while another is “Not authentic enough. It didn’t capture the essence of the Filipino” (167). This policing of identity extends to Miguel himself when his friends ask him, albeit in a jovial manner, “How can *you* [an expatriate] write about the Philippines?” (162). The jabs point to how much is at stake when one chooses to write about ethnic and national identity in broader, transnational contexts, struggles that were not foreign to Rizal’s time, either. “Filipino American” and “Filipino” ethnicities are viewed as mutually exclusive at the same time that they are placed along hierarchies of class and knowledge: While Sadie’s father congratulates Miguel for having a “pure” American accent (195), for instance, his friends assert that his transnational upbringing and inclination towards thinking in more cosmopolitan ways negates any credibility he might have in writing works that could be deemed “authentic” by his potential readership.

The new ilustrados are at danger, then, not only of replicating the perils that plagued Rizal’s own feelings of oppression in the 1800s but also of repeating the

historical shortcomings of classical multiculturalism. Ignacio notes that in digital spaces, the weight of the U.S.'s multicultural limitations on ethnic self-expression often become much more obvious in the face of writings like jokes and other forms of interactive communication. She observes that Filipino American participants, even more so than their Philippine counterparts, experienced difficulties integrating “their ideas about race, gender, colonialism, citizenship, nationalism, and the rigidity and authenticity of cultural boundaries. [...] the attempt to define authenticity showed them that traditional boundary making and adjudicating membership based on these traditional categories is a problem” (132). Just as Crispin’s exile in New York, (a consequence of often inflammatory political statements made in his literature), allowed him to write some of his most critical and influential work, the digital diaspora—particularly those members in areas outside the Philippines such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and the Middle East—are in unique positions to redefine the borders not only of authorship, but also of ethnic belonging.

The challenge put forth in *Ilustrado* to mobilize authorship in service of more capacious terms of identity and government policies, then, hearkens back to the original ilustrados while also gesturing to the present digital diaspora, including the more domestic members of the literati—principally the writers, readers, and critics of Filipino and Filipino American literature in both the Philippines and the United States. Remarkably, these very groups are rumored in the literary world to be obsolete, rare, or even nonexistent. For example, writing in New York City, Filipino American novelist and poet Bino Realuyo relates how a literary agent told a colleague that “nobody reads

Filipino books.” Realuyo adds that, “in the United States, publishing a Filipino author is synonymous to saving an endangered species from extinction” (299). Butch Dalisay cites Oregon-based playwright Alberto Florentino who laments that all that Filipinos and Filipino Americans read nowadays “are the Filipino tabloid papers published in the US which are heavy with stale news from Manila and ads [...] but short on Philippine literature, art, and culture.” Meanwhile, in *Ilustrado* itself, the critic Avellaneda writes that Crispin’s exile in New York was “a metaphor for an anonymous death” (12). The perception that Filipino American literature has no viable audience or market inspires Crispin to encourage Miguel to forge his own writerly or literary home country. Echoing Rizal’s promise to lift the veil over one’s defects and weaknesses, Crispin advises Miguel that his writing should “Quit hiding behind our strengths and stand beside our weaknesses and say, These are mine! These are what I’m working to fix! Learn to be completely honest. Then your work will transcend calendars and borders” (208). As if in response to this, Crispin himself writes and publishes multiple genres in numerous countries, compelled by the same fervor that inspired Mutya Dimatahimik to stop a tank. Crispin seeks to expand both the concept of what it means to be an author and a Filipino American, as well as what constitutes literature, *Ilustrado* citing his interactions in public speeches, online dialogues, as well as published work in both popular and scholarly genres.

In terms of audience, structure, and genre, Crispin encourages his ward to respond to the demands of the present, rather than to be bogged down in the past or in fulfilling market-driven notions of what should constitute Asian American or Filipino American

literature. Describing the digital diaspora's "domestic" members entrenched in the homelands, Crispin relates,

Our heartache for home is so profound we can't get over it, even when we're home and never left. Our imaginations grow moss. So every Filipino novel has a scene about the glory of cooking rice, or the sensuality of tropical fruit. And every short story seems to end with misery or redemptive epiphanies. . . . First step, get over it, man. I forget which jazz man said that it takes a long time before you can play like yourself. (207-8)

Crispin instructs Miguel to disregard the publishers, literary critics, and others who would seek to define Asian American and Filipino and Filipino American literature based on preconceived notions of "authenticity." While Avellaneda accuses Crispin of committing "the biggest sin a Pinoy can commit" by arrogantly engaging in a "tirade against our literature" (30), Crispin's impetus, as shown in this passage, is to highlight themes and genres that would normally be excluded from this literature in the first place.

Without this momentum to expand the boundaries of ethnic American literature, all that would remain is akin to what Miguel has left at the novel's closing: three empty cardboard boxes and the knowledge of a manuscript, still missing. Evocative of the *páginas en blanco* in Díaz's *Oscar Wao*, Crispin's missing manuscript also brings to mind other lost ethnic American works, like Japanese American author John Okada's oeuvre outside of his classic *No-No Boy*. Responsible for bringing *No-No Boy* to a wider audience (Song 69), authors Lawson Fusao Inada and Frank Chin describe how they sought to uncover Okada's other works, and fell short. In the introduction and afterword to *No-No Boy*, they lament Okada's lost words in heartbroken tones, Chin resorting to sheer rage at the lost documents and Inada using the phrase "it hurt" half a dozen times to

describe how Okada's wife, Dorothy Okada, tried and failed to garner interest in her husband's writing, resorting to burning what remained of his near-finished second novel because, as she explained to Chin, "Nobody had any use for them. Nobody wanted them" (257). The empty boxes and missing manuscript also bring to mind the irrecoverable works of Filipino literature lost to history, natural disaster, political censorship, and—as Realuyo and others suggest—sheer indifference in and by its potential readership.

In the suspended space of the island shack amid the three cardboard boxes, however, is hope. Finding the boxes empty, a disoriented Miguel realizes that "That which was missing only outlined that which was not. Their emptiness contained the entirety of what had been lived, and the certainties of how it ended, how it must end for each of us" (299). The novel argues that we have only one life to fill the pages of our identities. Or, as crispin1037@elsalvador.gob.sv might put it, our "heroic assist" to restore the legacy of lost manuscripts depends on us mobilizing all of our opportunities to connect with others through writing, to continually define and redefine our ethnic identity in response to a dynamic, transnational readership. This call to action explains the fourth ending proposed by Crispin for *Ilustrado*, the conclusion that he posits "will eventually make most sense: A blank page rises up to receive black letters. . . I transform memory into fiction. . . The door closes. Silence. Only the cold city breath on my face. I transform fiction into memory" (296). Crispin describes an autofictional moment of writing and rewriting, an act of creation inspired by the belief that every story has more than one possible ending.

The one text named by title in the conclusion confirms the argument of this final scene. Beside Miguel and the three empty boxes is the metafictional book, *The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim*, written by “the Bombay lawyer Mir Bahadur Ali” (298). Ali is actually a fictional character in another genre-bending text, “The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim,” whose author Jorge Luis Borges described as “both a hoax *and* a pseudo-essay” (“Autobiographical” 43), but which was also published as a short story in his collection, *El jardín de senderos que se bifurcan* (*The Garden of Forking Paths*). In “The Approach,” Borges’s narrator describes Ali’s “insatiable search for a soul by means of the delicate glimmerings or reflections this soul has left in others” (84), which we might also read as a lovely metaphor for how Miguel and Crispin affect each other transethnically throughout *Ilustrado*.¹³⁰ Just as Miguel pursues Crispin’s daughter Dulcinea, Ali’s unnamed law student seeks out the elusive Al-Mu'tasim via eyewitnesses whose divinity is evident in “an ascending progression” throughout the tale (“Approach” 85). While Borges’ narrator suggests that the law student’s ensuing search puts forth “the idea that the Almighty is also in search of Someone, and that Someone, in search of a yet superior” (“Approach” 85), we might also read the law student’s pursuit as a search for the ever elusive missing manuscript: Writers in multiple spaces will eventually find what they seek, but only if they keep on writing in collaboration with their readers, if they keep on expanding those borders of that “real home country” outward.

¹³⁰ Incidentally, in connection with the idea of missing manuscripts, Borges’s narrator in “The Approach” mentions his failed efforts to find the “greatly superior” first edition of Ali’s book (82), and having to settle for the second edition instead.

Similar to *Ilustrado*'s own presence, the mention of Ali's fictional book evokes deliberate metaleptic discomfort in its readers. For instance, Borges rather proudly reported, "Those who read 'The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim' took it at face value, and one of my friends even ordered a copy from London" ("Autobiographical" 43). Similarly, Yuan muses on Syjuco's novel, "Thus began the meticulous conception of Salvador's life and entire bibliography, one so detailed that were it not for the presence of Google today, *Ilustrado* would leave many readers convinced of his existence." More significantly, Borges' essay illustrates a moment of an author finding his own voice, learning, as the jazz man Miles Davis is commonly attributed as saying, that "sometimes you have to play a long time to be able to play like yourself." As if contemplating this idea in his "Autobiographical Essay," Borges muses, "Perhaps I have been unfair to ['The Approach']; it now seems to me to foreshadow and even to set the pattern for those tales that were somehow awaiting me, and upon which my reputation as a storyteller was to be based" (43). Italo Calvino defines Borges's moment of authorial creation as "the last great invention of a new literary genre in our time. . . a literature raised to the second power"—what we might today refer to as metafiction and what Calvino calls, after the French theorists, "potential literature" (50-1). For Syjuco, as for Miguel and Crispin, this literature finds its greatest potential in the elusive digital diaspora of writers who have access to the world through their keyboards. While Miguel never finds Dulcinea, Crispin, in his *Kaputol* trilogy, finds her as the protagonist Dulcé, who says she is going to be an author in order to write "a book of possibilities" (286).

Layers of Authorship: Everett writes Turner writes Styron

and in my voice you will hear, / from across the oceans surrounding / the
archipelago, as if reverberated through / the ages, the voice of our future son.
--Joseph O. Legaspi, "Imagined Love Poem to My Mother from My Father"

While Percival Everett's novels acknowledge and in many ways honor the place that multiculturalism has afforded African American literature in popular and academic circles, his works also contend with the limitations placed upon this genre, showing how these boundaries can be troubled in productive and creative ways. His latest novel, *Percival Everett* by *Virgil Russell*, centers on the relationship of a father and son who take turns narrating the text in increasingly dizzying and overlapping ways. The father and son's stories and their conversations about the stories are interspersed with a cast of characters both fictional and real: Historical figures like the slave rebellion leader Nat Turner, author William Styron, and even Charlton Heston coexist alongside fictional characters like the ranch owner turned contractor turned doctor Murphy Lang and the painter Gregory Lang.¹³¹ As the stories and storytellers weave and intermingle, the nature of the self becomes ever more unstable. The narrator's identity becomes ever more nebulous, as does the relationship between narrator and audience. At one point, it is even suggested that the son is dead, and the father is telling his stories to a ghost. At first, the

¹³¹ Just as with the father and son's names (see the second footnote in this chapter), the names of the characters of which they write are often confused throughout the text. Murphy and Gregory shift identities and occupations throughout the novel, sometimes even in the same telling. As if to make the characters even more confusing, the father and son often refer to the characters not as Murphy Lang and Gregory Lang, but simply as Murphy and Lang. The significance of names is one of the novel's central questions, as suggested by the names of the novel's three main sections: "Hesperus" and "Phosphorus" are synonyms of the name of the third section, "Venus." This trio of names are a nod to German philosopher Gottlob Frege, who used the planet's descriptors to question the essence of names themselves, and the information they do or do not hold (for more on Frege's theories, see his "On Sense and Reference").

multivocality and shifting perspectives smacks of common postmodern gameplay. The metafictional nature of the text—referenced even in the title itself—evokes the playful and introspective narcissism characterizing works by John Barth, Italo Calvino, and others. However, embedded within this playfulness is a seriousness that in *Virgil Russell* specifically emerges in this very space of metafictional ambiguity. It is through authorial metafiction that Everett actually accesses the transethnic self, an ethnic identity defined intersectionally, across textual and temporal borders, and found in the closeness between characters, readers, and the text. For Everett, ethnicity becomes not a category of identity, but rather an event emerging out of intimate relationality. By focusing on personal connections, Everett, like Syjuco, confronts literary criticism concerning issues of ethnic identity and history in order to create intimacy not only between characters, but also in the sacred triangle composed of the author, reader, and text.

In *The Art of Intimacy* (2013), Stacey d’Erasmus observes that the intimacy readers feel when approaching any text is found both in the closeness portrayed between two characters, as well as the environment of the text itself. She points out, “the textual *where* of [the characters’] meetings, the meeting ground, the figurative topos—and by this I don’t mean physical locations where characters meet, but locutions, places in language that they share—actually produces not only opportunities for intimacy, but also the actual sense of intimacy: it is, sometimes, the thing itself” (D’Erasmus 11-12). Therefore, intimacy is manifested in relationships between characters, but also in the ways that the text implicates readers, drawing them into the language itself. By deliberately emphasizing the world outside the text and by pulling the reader outside of the textual

environment, metafiction like Everett's appears to confound d'Erasmo's idea of intimacy. Nonetheless, the very self-referential nature of authorial metafiction is what, for Everett, allows an effective exploration of transethnicity. By manipulating the scales of authorship—and even of history and ethnicity—in this novel, Everett collapses the biographical and content-oriented characteristics that we normally depend on to define a genre like African American literature. Instead, he provides a means by which we can, if you will, critique the critiques of the genre, and have a more interconnected understanding of authorship.

Texts such as Erdrich's *Shadow Tag* and Apostol's *Gun Dealers' Daughter* showed that author-characters inform their transethnic identity by accessing multiple histories, cultures, and nationalities. Arguing for restraint against the way we regard ethnic history and its corresponding literature, professor and critic Kenneth Warren provocatively asserts that, in fact, African American literature was itself a product which emerged in response to a state of racial inequality and segregation that has since ended. Suggesting that the consistent logic and aims characterizing writing during the Jim Crow era no longer apply, Warren argues that "with the legal demise of Jim Crow, the coherence of African American literature has been correspondingly, if sometimes imperceptibly, eroded as well" (2). Therefore, he states that African American writing itself as a response to social inequality no longer exists as a cohesive literary practice. While Warren posits economic class as a more distinctive and appropriate marker for literary genres, he ultimately associates African American literature with a unified, teleological sense of historical progress that Erdrich and Apostol's protagonists prove to

be nonexistent. This section thus returns to the temporal and the historical by connecting the instability of historical accounts to the dynamics of authorship and literary criticism. While *Virgil Russell* challenges Warren's perception of a monolithic, historically specific body of African American literature, Warren nevertheless asks similar questions to those suggested by Everett's numerous works of fiction: Who defines African American literature, and by what standards? What is black writing now, as opposed to in the past? And given the fact that others continue to characterize African American writing as a static body of work, how can we account for its variances of content, purpose, and style over time? Everett shares Warren's concerns about how we as readers and consumers are placing undue emphasis on limiting definitions of African American writing. While these limits may have helped multicultural institutions like education in defending the value of retrieving, publishing, and studying these texts in addition to—or even in place of—canonical texts, Everett and Warren argue, in divergent ways, that these limitations have outgrown their helpfulness. Warren would like to believe the solution is in reinforcing and even strengthening restrictions placed on African American literature, whereas I argue that Everett wishes to expand of African American literature by focusing on multiple scales of writing and connection.

Everett complicates the question of definitions in his novel, *Erasure*. Not unlike Everett himself, *Erasure*'s protagonist, Thelonious "Monk" Ellison, is a writer whose experimental works often defy conventional categories of ethnicity and genre. For instance, despite the fact that Monk's novels predominantly include philosophical contemplations of Mark Twain, Euripides, and Aristophanes, his work is continually

faced with criticism like, “The novel is finely crafted, with fully developed characters, rich language and subtle play with the plot, but one is lost to understand what this reworking of Aeschylus’ *The Persians* has to do with the African American experience” (2).¹³² Pigeonholed by the author’s skin color on the book jacket, Monk is further frustrated by the commercial success of Juanita Mae Jenkins’s *We’s Lives in Da Ghetto*, a novel whose story of a black woman’s horrific experiences at the hands of black men is touted as a marvelous representation of authentic African American life. Monk’s reaction is visceral. He relates, “I remembered passages of *Native Son* and *The Color Purple* and *Amos and Andy* and my hands began to shake, [. . .] people in the street shouting *dint, ax, fo, screet* and *fahvre!* and I was screaming inside, complaining that I didn’t sound like that” (61). While a denunciation of Jenkins, Monk’s response is more importantly a censure of the literary world that would make Jenkins its darling. The novel shows how, by favoring works like *We’s Lives in Da Ghetto*, other texts and voices deemed “inauthentic” are silenced. Monk responds in the best way he knows: through writing. Under the pseudonym Stagg R. Leigh, he writes a novel called *My Pafology* (later retitled *Fuck*), which parodies Richard Wright’s *Native Son* and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and is, to Monk’s consternation, incredibly successful.¹³³ Monk is forced to wrestle with

¹³² Monk’s novel criticized here may be a biographical nod to Everett’s novel, *Frenzy* (1996), which explores the life of the Greek god of wine, Dionysos.

¹³³ In this way, *Erasure* is similar to a poioumenon—that is, a fiction that is itself centered around the creation of another work-in-progress. Other works in the tradition include Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* (1759), Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* (1962), Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook* (1962), Gilbert Sorrentino’s *Mulligan Stew* (1979), and even Kathryn Stockett’s bestseller *The Help* (2009; see McHaney). The pseudonym Stagg R. Leigh refers to a pimp and gambler named Lee Shelton, popularly known as Stagolee or Stagger Lee. Shelton shot a man in 1895 while arguing over a Stetson hat (a detail that the American West-loving Everett surely relished), and became—particularly in song—the epitome of the streetwise defiant black man. For more on the legend of Stagger Lee, see Brown. The other successful novel against which Mon/Leigh rails—Jenkins’ novel *We’s Lives in Da Ghetto*—parodies popularly regarded texts by

the realization that the U.S.—particularly educated, literate America—mistakes the joke for the real deal. While there is no place for an African American avant-garde novelist, doors open up with no struggle for the stereotypical Stagg R. Leigh.

If *Erasure* exposes the danger of a singular notion of African American literature, *Virgil Russell* offers a way to approach and envision black writing today. African American writing, the author-characters of the novel seem to suggest, is not limited to one genre, topic, or historical movement. The novel contains a multitude of linear and nonlinear forms and genres, and can in many ways be categorized as a hybrid text. Filled with allusions to literary, cultural, and philosophical texts, *Virgil Russell* sometimes literalizes Barthes's assertion that a text "is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (128). The first half of the text is a collection of stories which seep into each other, giving way in the second half to a deceptively linear-appearing plot about the father's adventures in a nursing home.¹³⁴ At the center of the novel is the father-son writing team, at once each other's writers and audience to the point where the two begin to blur. *Virgil Russell* thus posits a relational model of authorship on the most intimate scale—the moments of connection between two people. While theorists of African American literature often deal with distinctions on the level of the ethnic group (for example, the attributes of African American literature) or even against or across the nation as a whole (like studies that focus on African American

and featuring African American women, such as Sapphire's *Push* (1999) or Sister Souljah's *The Coldest Winter Ever* (1999).

¹³⁴ By naming the nursing home Teufelsdröckh, Everett is pulling his own version of Syjuco's evocation of Mir Bahadur Ali in *Ilustrado*. Not unlike Everett's *Erasure*, the reference is a *poïoumenon*: In this case, Teufelsdröckh refers to Diogenes Teufelsdröckh, a fictional German philosopher who expounds on clothing and other social matters in Thomas Carlyle's 1836 metafictional novel *Sartor Resartus*.

responses to the Middle Passage), Everett foregrounds this single relationship between the father and son storytellers and then expands it, demonstrating how this intimate and transethnic form of writing then gestures outward to incorporate larger temporal and generic frames that go beyond discrete considerations of ethnic American literary genres. Ultimately, while Everett is not as quick as Warren to relegate African American literature to a specific era and to thus announce its demise, the novel points to issues beyond any historical period to instead focus on form and relationality, to in turn contract and then enlarge current views of African American literature. Rather than limiting our definitions of African American genres, he seeks to widen the characterization of African American literature in broad strokes. As Dimock might put it, he hopes to expand the classification of African American literature to the point where its very arbitrariness as a category is exposed.

While maybe not in direct response to Warren, Everett's text complicates the historical emphasis that critics like Warren place on African American literature and the African American experience. One extensive challenge to this forward-moving, teleological history is the use of Nat Turner as a recurring character. The leader of the famous Virginia slave rebellion was executed in 1831, almost half a century before the emergence of Jim Crow laws. An enigmatic historical figure, Turner was literate and devoutly Christian. He directly associated biblical tenets to his belief in the manumission of slaves. His slave revolt, the bloodiest in U.S. history, rattled the nation, sparking fears of more insurrections that led to heightened rhetoric for abolition on the one hand, and a

tamping down of slave freedoms on the other. This increasingly widening national rift helped create the tense conditions that incited the Civil War a few decades later.

Turner soon reemerged in the popular consciousness with novelist William Styron's imagining of the rebellion in his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Confessions of Nat Turner* (1967), which was published soon after the legislative (though not ideological) dismantling of Jim Crow in the first half of the 1960s. While Styron portrays Turner as both a terror and a victim of oppression, Everett's novel presents Nat Turner as an author in his own right, highlighting the instability of Turner's historical role via the controversy surrounding his confessions. In doing so, the novel connects the history of African American literature to a time before Jim Crow. Turner's presence in *Virgil Russell* problematizes Warren's contention that African American literature grew out of the Jim Crow era by hearkening back to a representative example of contentious storytelling which challenged racial inequality well before African American writers started protesting Jim Crow in their work. More importantly, Everett decontextualizes Turner in order to challenge Warren and other critics' inclinations to tie African American literature to any one particular time period or historical experience. African American literature, just like African Americanness itself, is a dynamic entity that continues to be written and refined over time. In contrast to Warren's claims, Everett even suggests that this genre can even reach backwards to an era before the term "African American" even existed.

The first appearance the slave leader Nat Turner makes in *Virgil Russell* is to defy the subjection that he experiences in real life via history, slavery, and the color of his

skin. In a reversal of authorship and authority, the fictional character Murphy dreams that Turner is writing *The Confessions of Bill Styron*, rather than the other way around. The father tells his son, “You could write that [novel for Turner], then follow it with the *The Truth about Natty* by Chingachgook” (16). The authorship of Turner and Chingachgook, the Mohican chief who advises Natty Bumppo in James Fenimore Cooper’s *Leatherstocking Tales* (1823-1841), signify instances not of writing back to the dominant powers, but of literally rewriting and decentering privilege in ways that anticipate the transethnic impulse. In his Author’s Note, Styron writes, “Perhaps the reader will wish to draw a moral from this narrative, but it has been my own intention to try to re-create a man and his era, and to produce a work that is less an ‘historical novel’ in conventional terms than a meditation on history.” Styron does not profess historical accuracy but suggests he will bring the character and time to life in what he claims will be an unprejudiced way. Even so, Styron bases his novel on interview transcriptions taken in 1831 by a lawyer named Thomas Gray. Many critics contend that Gray was himself quite prejudiced in taking down Turner’s confessions. Both Gray’s transcriptions and Styron’s text have thus been mired in controversy, particularly regarding the potentially inaccurate and biased nature of the accounts and the appropriation of Turner’s voice in both texts.¹³⁵ Critics at the time of the publication of Styron’s novel were chiefly disturbed by what they read as attempts to demonize Turner’s sexuality, while also presenting him as a vacillating and timid leader (Sieving 41).

¹³⁵ For more on the controversies of authorship and accuracy surrounding Nat Turner, see Almendinger, Fabricant, and Stewart.

Styron nonetheless purports in his novel to “re-create” Turner and the events leading to his death, in contrast to the father-son writing team in Everett’s novel, who make little attempt at historical accuracy at all. *Virgil Russell*’s writers instead situate Turner in a personal framework to show how their histories are interconnected. As if in response to these potential biases against the slave insurrectionist, the father thus envisions Turner as having the power to reach forward in time to take poetic license with the story of William Styron (“Nat says, it’s only fair that I too get to tell what is true” [208]). In this way, the father rewrites Turner in order to attach Turner’s story to his own. Expanding what it means to be an author, the novel suggests that Turner is a writer whose own tale can be gleaned from the surfaces of the misrepresented and mishandled stories that evoke him in the present. As Everett’s narrator writes, “There are no realities that are more real than others, only more privileged” (31). The father honors his imagined vision of Turner above what he implies are the equally imagined confessions rendered by Gray and Styron.

The father’s attempt to create an intimate connection between himself and Turner does not come easily. In fact, the novel distances Nat Turner from the reality of the protagonists. In one scene, the father describes Murphy as a doctor who accepts for payment a collection of Leica cameras. By peering through one of these cameras, Murphy first “sees” Nat Turner—a character who had previously appeared only in his dreams—smiling at him, ghostlike, through the viewfinder (57). The novel represents several layers of writing: The real-life author Everett writes the father and son, who in turn write Murphy, who in turn envisions Nat Turner (who was himself recreated by Gray

and Styron). These layers of authorship mirror the layers of truth that Turner himself occupies: He is a man who has been written and rewritten by history, the truth of his experiences distorted to represent a simulacrum of reality, like what one would see in a photograph or a dream. By their nature, photographs inaugurate a different version of the world at the same time they are meant to represent, and even be a sort of stand-in, for this world. In a similar way, Turner is thus ubiquitous and unknowable, not unlike Everett himself, whose constructed authorial presence often haunts the pages of many (if not all) of his novels.

Everett adds a temporal element to these distortions of Nat Turner by placing the man and his poker-playing friends in the middle of the U.S. Civil Rights era. The poetic license that the father takes with Turner's story bridges the temporal gap between them, allowing the father to provide his own meditation on Turner's history to counter Styron's. Jess Row's defense of Styron's novel states that the author's liberties with history have deliberately artistic motivations, adding that more recent historical novels like Morrison's *Beloved* and Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian* "embody a radically different sensibility, one that refuses to collapse the past into the present and that makes history almost fetishistically 'different,' difficult to accept or assimilate." Everett exposes the arbitrariness of such a literary distinction by collapsing the past and the present around Turner, who he characterizes as a misunderstood figure whose story and history as a slave were never acceptable or accessible in the first place.

The novel thus imagines a writerly life for Nat Turner, one that complicates the association of authorship with authority. On the mall on the eve of the 1963 March on

Washington, Turner fumes that his writing has been removed from a speech by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. In an eerie parallel, Turner views Martin Luther King Jr.'s consternation the next day when the latter discovers his own speech stolen and replaced with a different one, possibly by the FBI (83). The orator's shock is later matched by Turner's own, when Turner realizes the FBI actually gave King "the bogus confession that had been attributed to [Turner] by that white devil Thomas Gray" (85-86). Turner's "bogus" words are fed to King in order to infiltrate his influence over his audience. King, however, manages to speak extemporaneously. Had the defrauders succeeded, the King of *Virgil Russell* might not have delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech, itself an assemblage of cultural allusions, quotes from the Bible and King's colleagues, as well as lyrics from American folk songs. It is no coincidence that Turner, himself a figure who we have similarly pieced together via an array of historical writings, is present in this scene to hear King's most famous oration. This fragmented biography, in fact, further echoes Everett's author-narrators themselves, whose lives are told in piecemeal.

Placing Turner's potentially prejudiced confession in King's hands further stresses the ways that others have appropriated their voices—both during and after their lifetimes. Turner's authorship has been confounded by the levels of narratives heaped upon his own, a form of erasure over which Turner had little to no control. Through much fewer pages than the major works that preceded it, Everett's anachronistic account of Turner's confessions humanizes the historical figure in a way that relates Turner's amusement, frustrations, and fears, ascribing to Turner the wry humor and honesty of a

man more knowledgeable than popular history has often made him out to be. Furthermore, Everett challenges Warren's claim of a historicized African American literary genre by narrowing the temporal scale between Turner and King. Deemed by many to mark the beginning of Civil Rights and the beginning of the end of the judicial and legislative existence of Jim Crow, King's speech is here shown to be borne out of a response to a structural oppression that began with the systemic mistreatment of Nat Turner himself.

In fact, Civil Rights lawyer Michelle Alexander deliberately takes Jim Crow segregation out of its historicized context, stating, "African Americans have repeatedly been controlled through institutions such as slavery and Jim Crow, which appear to die, but are then reborn in new form, tailored to the needs and constraints of the time. . . We have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesigned it" (21, 13). Warren, responding to Alexander in a *PMLA* article, insists her use of the term Jim Crow is largely metaphorical, as the legislative impetus behind the laws no longer exists. While this is valid, what cannot be denied are the material conditions relating to racial inequality that existed before Jim Crow laws and continue to exist today, exemplifying what Alexander identifies in the context of the legal system as being the moral equivalent of Jim Crow, almost equally effective in enacting racial systems of control that were seen in earlier modes of segregation (Alexander 13).¹³⁶ In fact, as a direct consequence of

¹³⁶ Lisa Marie Cacho echoes Alexander's sentiments when she states, "Certain vulnerable and impoverished populations and places of color have been 'differentially included' within the U.S. legal system. As targets of regulation and containment, they are deemed deserving of discipline and punishment but not worthy of protection" (5). Meanwhile, novelist John Edgar Wideman focuses on the material conditions of Jim Crow-like inequalities experienced particularly by African American men in his memoir *Brothers and Keepers* and his quasi-autobiographical metafictional novel *Fanon*.

Turner's rebellion, a series of oppressive laws were enacted to further limit the movement and education of slaves, while slaveholders themselves also attempted to silence black preachers like Turner (Wolf 196-9). Everett thus places the rebellion leader Turner in conversation with the orator King, showing that their words and images have been distorted by others in order to illustrate how, despite having opposite philosophies of violence and protest, the two nevertheless have a lot in common, not only with each other, but with the father who connects their stories in the present. Their writerly responses to the limitations inflicted upon them by the color of their skin embodies a transethnic response that Everett productively juxtaposes to reveal that intimate moments of connection can occur across a historical continuum.

While Everett's fictional Turner attaches himself to a tradition of writers like Virginia Woolf, the father in turn then places himself in a tradition of authors that include Turner, showing them both to be fellow writers who seek to expand current assessments of their abilities that go beyond skin color. He explains to his son, "What I am telling you is a story about Nat Turner and William Styron. This is my way of giving you my history, on this eve of my visit to the gallows, and much of your understanding of my history, and therefore yours, relies on your acknowledgement that I am prophet of sorts" (87). Prophecy in this temporal sense becomes a synonym for storytelling, an act the father accomplishes, the novel later reveals, on his death bed, possibly even after his death. As storyteller, prophet, and historian, the father writes his own past, and in turn creates a kind of origin story for his son, as well.

Everett's novel ultimately questions the arbitrariness of literary categories based on time or the identity of the author or narrator. As far as the father is concerned, that Turner existed long before the advent of the term "African American" or the institutionalization of Jim Crow laws is immaterial to the role Turner plays in his history as a writer or an American. The intimacy of language opens up a space to claim that which is otherwise inaccessible and incomplete. Language also, the father suggests, allows its authors to reveal or not reveal themselves and their place in time. The father relates, "however much constructed, affirmed, and validated by the very structure of the language that allows at least a pretense of making meaning, I am able to reveal my story without locating myself in the telling, at the time of the telling. Perhaps not even whether I am in fact the narrator at all" (132). The father challenges reader expectations that are simultaneously supported and confounded by the self-referential techniques of metafiction. As writer, storyteller, and prophet, he appoints himself as the authority over the way he views his history and its power to define him.

Confronting the Shadows

African American literary scholar Xiomara Santamarina offers another way to approach Kenneth Warren's study, pointing out that his "central, counterintuitive gesture is to suggest that chucking or giving up the past and its iterations of black particularity might be a more effective way of producing progressive political transformations" (399). To put it another way, Warren relegates African American literature to the time of Jim Crow with the ultimate intention of doing away with inequality, of moving literary genres

away from racial politics and into other realms—most notably that of class. The Jim Crow era, Warren argues, gave birth to “black writers [who] were expected to produce work that exhibited or presumed black difference as a distinct and needful thing, even as they acknowledged, lamented, and sought to overcome the conditions that produced that difference” (27). He asserts that the only effective response to these restrictions is to relegate the ethnic designator to the past, allowing one to give up history’s worrisome associations with black essentialism. Taken in this light, it is not hard to see how a novelist like Thelonious Ellison or, for that matter, Percival Everett, might see problems with the “African American” literary category, similar to Crispin Salvador’s complaint that Filipino American literature seems to require mention of “the sensuality of tropical fruit” (Syjuco 208). Specifically, Everett and Warren challenge the intrinsic assumption that all black writing must deal with race, racial oppression, or with a specific version of African American life, like the folk traditions privileged by critics like Houston Baker.

However, in exploring Warren’s text, Santamarina also reveals its limitations. “What,” she asks, would an implementation of Warren’s argument “look like in an egalitarian society?” (399). Even before uncovering the answer to Santamarina’s question, the nature of her inquiry reveals a problem in Warren’s line of reasoning and in Santamarina’s reading of his text. After all, what Warren calls for is a stark and immediate transformation of the way ethnic American literary tradition has operated since its emergence as a field. He suggests, in place of this, a paradigm which removes the “problematic assumption of race-group interest” from the genre altogether (110). Then again, Santamarina posits that what Warren is arguing is fully possible only in, as

she puts it, an “egalitarian society” that “giv[es] up the past” (399). But would a true egalitarian society really require such a dismissal of historical narratives? And is relegating the genre of African American literature to obsolescence really the most effective way to enact the disciplinary ruptures needed to achieve this “vision” (Santamarina 400)? These questions invoke David Hollinger’s argument for voluntary over involuntary affiliations, ethnic identity based not on blood, but on “affiliation by revocable consent” (13). While Hollinger is correct to prefer the former, his argument rests on a similarly utopic assumption that voluntary affiliations are equally accessible to all, and open to enactment on comprehensive scales. The worlds that would accommodate Hollinger and Warren’s visions unfortunately have yet to arrive.

Another way to read studies like Warren’s would be alongside the critique of a likewise provocative argument, one suggested by Everett himself. In *Virgil Russell*, the narrator delays another round of stories about the characters Murphy and Lang by instead relating an anecdote about a friend who theorized that race does not exist. The father recalls how a “low-level academic took [his friend] to task about this so-called theory [. . .] the hack academic, his name was Housetown Pastrychef or Dallas Roaster, something like that, wrote that my friend was essentially full of excrement and that, furthermore, race was not only a valid category but a necessary one. This may or may not have been true” (34). This story comes after a series of others on academics losing touch with reality, each of which suggest academia’s failure to relate to the people to, and about whom, they write, particularly in the context of multiculturalism and ethnic studies. While Everett does not excuse himself from this company of fellow intellectuals, he does

critique the value of such theories to material, lived conditions. He recognizes the value of academic pursuits to challenge close-minded ideas of race, but also points out that these pursuits are themselves limited, that they call for a more fluid, transethnic approach.

In his book, *Critical Memory*, Houston Baker—who I argue is the Hometown Pastrychef named above—suggests that Ellison and the writers who followed him have lost their “critical memory”—that is, they have forgotten America’s history of racial degradation. As a counter, he offers Richard Wright as an example of someone who rendered African Americans’ humiliation in shocking detail. Baker asserts that, unlike Wright, these other authors have traded their critical memory in order to be “liked” by white America (15). Mirroring the story that the father in *Virgil Russell* tells his son about the academic who challenges his friend’s ideas on race, Baker laments, “Ellison’s ‘ghosts’—his shadowers [. . .] have gladly accepted the affirmative action benefits and rewards bestowed by race in America while writing fiercely with studied hypocrisy that there is no such thing in America as race” (39). He thus derides authors like Charles Johnson and Ernest J. Gaines as ungrateful for the strides that their literal and literary African American fathers have made for equality. Part of Baker’s proof that these novelists seek white likeability is the wide acclaim Ellison and his “shadowers” have received by critics, white and otherwise (39). He suggests that their acceptance is fueled by the content of their works, which show none of the oppression that he feels is necessary for serious African American literature.

Intriguingly, Baker’s disapproval of Ellison and his counterparts mirrors the condemnation that Wright himself expressed for Zora Neale Hurston, in particular for her

novel *Their Eyes were Watching God*. Wright surmised that “Hurston voluntarily continues in her novel the tradition which was *forced* upon the Negro in the theatre, that is, the minstrel technique that makes the ‘white folks’ laugh” (76, emphasis his). While Baker and Wright have innovated our approaches to African American literary traditions, the two men privilege a vernacular element of protest writing that dismisses and/or silences voices like Hurston’s. While not as explicit as Warren in tying African American literature to a specific time period or legislative agenda, they insinuate that some versions of African American literature are more legitimate and honorable than others. As J. Martin Favor asks, “can [Baker’s literary model] also account for the presence and products of the black middle class? Does this particular vernacular also have room for, say, immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean and the vernaculars they bring along with them?” (4-5). Favor’s implicit answer is found in the quashing of voices and representations like that of Monk from *Erasure* or the father and son (and even Nat Turner) from *Virgil Russell*.

In fact, Baker’s critique of *Erasure* also speaks to this privileging of a specific representation of African Americanness. Baker says that the novel, “for all its parodic and deconstructive energy and achievement is completely clean, clear, and empty before what I believe is the signal social and political fact of its time, namely, the Ronald Reagan/George Herbert Walker Bush compromise of American decency and rights that produced George W. Bush” (*South* 149). Thus, Baker faults *Erasure* for not dealing with what he feels were the most pertinent issues at the time of the book’s writing. One cannot help but wonder if Baker meant the criticism in jest. Like the critic in *Erasure* who is

“lost to understand what [Monk’s] reworking of Aeschylus’ *The Persians* has to do with the African American experience” (2), Baker reads Everett’s *Erasure*—a novel about the troubled reception of African Americans on the literary scene—and is at a loss to understand why it does not mention Reagan’s policies in the White House.¹³⁷ After Baker indicts *Erasure*’s failure to discuss the legacy of the Reagan administration, he goes on to say that the novel’s one redeeming virtue is that its protagonist Monk brings to mind the jazz musician who Baker identifies as the “actual” Thelonious Monk (150). In Baker’s purview, there is only room for *one* Thelonious Monk, and the man who is a fan of Aeschylus and who writes novels on metaphysics and French post-structuralism is not it.

The father in *Virgil Russell* is in some ways just as dismissive of the so-called Housetown Pastrychef. He does not believe himself knowledgeable enough to understand the literary controversy, and the debate leaves him “feeling like I was looking at a clock with three hands” (34). The father’s friend dismisses the academic as having “made his living and career out of being the ethnic” (34). In response, the father implies that neither the scholar nor his friend really spoke to him on his terms, and that the academic may very well be capitalizing on his role as an African American theorist. The friend’s accusation opens up the question of intention, an idea central to authorship. W.K. Wimsatt, Jr., and Monroe C. Beardsley famously proclaim that the author’s purpose is lost once the text is unleashed onto the world. However, it is still important to consider what one might gain or lose by a particularly controversial utterance. For example,

¹³⁷ It is nevertheless worth noting that the same year that Baker writes this, Everett publishes his novel *The Water Cure*. Through the protagonist, romance novelist Ishmael Kidder, the novel forces readers to question the efficacy and ethicalness of George W. Bush and Donald Rumsfeld’s actions in Guantanamo and the Middle East

analyzing the sudden upswing in scholarly interest on African American women, Ann duCille observes a trend similar to that mentioned by the father's friend: Black and white scholars are attaching themselves to what she calls the "occult of true black womanhood" in order to advance their careers and their pocketbooks (601).¹³⁸ Should an author or critic's intentions make his or her words any less valid? What is the intended effect of what the Everett's narrator calls a "big bag of . . . Immaterial words" (33) to those who may not understand them? And what does someone have to gain by asserting that race is no longer a necessary consideration in personal and professional relationships? Musing on Warren's own intentions, Santamarina adds that however "counterintuitive" his methods (399), his aims in limiting the scope of African American literature are virtuous. Can the same be said of Baker?

Actually, by highlighting acts of African American authorship not directly related to Warren's Jim Crow legislation or to Baker's critical memory, Everett is not necessarily placing himself alongside Ellison's "shadowers" who might believe that racism or racial inequalities no longer exist. Neither, despite Baker's criticisms, is Everett dismissing all of the critics' arguments offhand. In fact, centering *Virgil Russell* on the writing relationship between father and son may very well be Everett's attempt at honoring his father's memory, in much the same way that Baker honors his own father in *Critical Memory*. Subtitled *Public Spheres, African American Writing, and Black Fathers and*

¹³⁸ Echoing Ann duCille's "occult of true black womanhood" (601), Hazel Carby wrote a series of essays from 1989 to the later 1990s that suggested we reframe the era in which she writes not as the culture wars or clashes over the literary canon, but rather as the "multicultural wars," noting that "[w]ithin Women's Studies and some literature departments, black women writers have been used and, I would argue, abused as cultural and political icons. . . to produce an essential black female subject for its own consumption" that has proved "very profitable for the culture industry (248-9).

Sons in America, Baker's text ties critical memory to the honor one bestows upon black men who navigated "American racial 'likes'" (49)—that is, the careful negotiations of tolerance and compromises made for white acceptance. He relates, "None of the men from my growing-up time got rich, famous . . . or secured their sons' futures. . . they worked wherever and whenever they could to hasten the call and reality of a reported American meritocracy—a meritocracy renovated, or so one was told. . . by white men in charge of the American table" (49). In other words, the men of Baker's father's generation learned that the fights they engaged in during the time of Civil Rights did not ensure a future for their sons, or secure freedom from the racial anxieties they nonetheless see emerging today. His reference to the "American table" hearkens back to Langston Hughes's poem, "I, Too, Sing America," the allusion suggesting that this generational hope for betterment began even before Baker's fathers fought against Jim Crow, and persists into the present. The text thus stresses the importance of critical memory in life and in literature, of revering the hope and tribulations of his fathers.

Despite Everett's reference to Baker and *Critical Memory*, it is unclear whether Baker's representation of black fathers also applies to the father in *Virgil Russell*. The father divulges instances of ethnically-based persecution (*Virgil* 60-2, 81-2), but the novel interrupts its own circular and palimpsestic storytelling to relay instead, in common third-person narration, the father's experiences in a nursing home. The linear storyline stands in stark contrast to all that came before it, and is inspired by (what appears to be) the son's request that he "tell stories from now on without my interruptions" (131). In some ways a novel within a novel, (not unlike the structure of *Erasure*), *Virgil Russell's*

nursing home plot resembles stories of raucous overthrows of institutions as seen in novels like Ken Kesey's *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*. Faced with a staff whose cruelty outweighs their kindness, the father teams up with his best friend and fellow patient (or maybe fellow inmate?) Billy in order to gain a moment of freedom and, they hope, to get some of the more malicious orderlies fired in the process.

If hard pressed, one may connect this attempted overthrow *Critical Memory's* conclusion, where Baker proclaims that, if we work "critically and memorially with the best of our past, there is just a chance black fathers and sons may yet gather again in legions, genuinely about the business of redeeming ourselves" (73). After all, Everett dramatizes the destabilizing (though not complete toppling) of an establishment whose oppression at first seems insurmountable, relaying a temporary victory at the end of the nursing home storyline that mimics the redemptive sentiment Baker relays in his final paragraph. *Virgil Russell's* victory, however, comes at a price: Billy is goaded into madness by one of the orderlies. Notably, the nursing home scenes as a whole are devoid of racial politics,¹³⁹ Everett thus illustrating that enumerating ethnic strife is not the sole—or maybe even the most important—factor in self-identification.

However hopefully Baker ends his message on the recuperation of critical memory, he also aims the aforementioned call to "gather again in legions" (73) not to people like the father in *Virgil Russell* who failed to understand Hometown Pastrychef's claims, but to people who, "like Richard Wright, are literary and have social opportunity

¹³⁹ For instance, the novel leaves out any descriptions of most of the oppressive orderlies. Almost as if sharing his author notes, Everett lists and describes the nursing home employees (who Billy calls the Gang of Six), but avoids ethnic characterizations beyond mention that one of the orderlies has a "Nordic in appearance" (117).

to profit from archives of black writers, race men and race women who left examples of strategic, articulate, courageous interventions” (73). In other words, just as Baker points to some black authors as being properly respectful of African American critical memory (such as Wright), and others as not (such as Ellison and, it is implied, Everett), he concludes *Critical Memory* with the belief that it takes a certain level of opportunity and education to oppose the subjugation of “the majority” (73). Unlike Frantz Fanon who, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, predicted that the successful defeat of oppressive power could only come from the working class, Baker leaves it in the hands of the ilustrado-like educated elite, those who W.E.B. du Bois calls the “Talented Tenth” (du Bois 136) to enact change. Notably absent from Baker’s construction are people like the father in *Virgil Russell* who, when asked why he insists on writing the character Lang as a ranch owner, responds to his son simply by saying, “The ranches are not mine” (31). He knows he lacks the social and economic opportunities that would place him in the educated class on which those like du Bois fasten their aspirations. It is here that the father reminds us, “There are no realities that are more real than others, only more privileged” (31). We can see that reality itself is a story, and that the material and cultural reality of the father’s life—Warren’s class, Baker’s race, but other factors as well—informs the way he reads and writes his and others’ stories. At the same time, this reality also excludes him from the “majority” whom Baker hopes will benefit from this change.¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ In fact, *Erasure* parodies an educated, literate elite similar to the kind Baker champions, showing them as overcome by the “authenticity” of Jenkins’s *We’s Lives in da Ghetto*, and as easily duped by Monk’s parodic and absurdist take on African American literature in the form of *My Pafology*.

However, while the father is left out of this constructed hope for future black fathers and sons, there is no doubt that Everett himself intends his readers to connect the *Virgil Russel*'s fictional father to the real father whose name graces the dedication page. The novel opens with a dedication to Percival Leonard Everett, who died in 2010, two years before publication. Knowing this biographical fact from novel's paratext adds poignancy to the father and son's scenes of collaborative writing and storytelling. In fact, in a review essay touting the pros and cons of metafiction, Sam Sacks reads *Virgil Russell* as a more meaningful example of metafiction precisely because of the obvious and deliberately evident sincerity associated with the book's dedication. As Sacks notes, "Behind this satirical game of 'Pin the Tail on the Narrator' is Mr. Everett's attempt . . . to find a deconstructed fictional form that matches the bewilderment and helplessness (and self-preserving impulse toward gallows humor) we feel in the presence of death." He continues, "The note of sadness struck in the dedication swells and echoes through the wreckage of narrative, reaching a pitch of extraordinary anguish." The appearance in the novel's title of the author's and his father's name, immediately followed by the dedication, begs for this additional layer of reading. The novel opens with the son visiting his father at a nursing home, the latter seemingly bed-ridden, and the son asks, "Why don't you just admit that you're working again?" (14). Speculating that Everett is writing this novel in the wake of his father's death, the reader cannot help but imagine father and son—the two Percival Everetts—in conversation, or even the one author Percival Everett in conversation with himself, imagining his father is still alive and able to respond. The reader is made aware of the conversation between father and son while he or she is at the

same time drawn into the drama of the grieving son, returning to his writing after his father's death.

This highlighting of the real-life author alongside our fictional authors evokes what Eugen Simion calls the return of the author, after the death knell of the author sounded by Barthes in 1967. Simion's term is a bit misleading since he ultimately argues—as does Seán Burke, Benjamin Widiss, and others—that the author never really left the text. Similarly, by recalling the biographical author and responding to literary theorists in *Virgil Russell*, Everett commemorates the return of an author who ever remains, drawing attention to the philosophical and material registers on which authors operate in their work. Everett's devastating portrayal of these two registers is best seen in the polyvocal storytelling of the two writing protagonists:

I could be writing you could be writing me could be writing you. I am a comatose old man writing here now and again what my dead or living son might write if he wrote, or I am a dead or living son writing what my dying father might write for me to have written. I am a performative utterance. I carry the illocutionary ax. But imagine anyway that it is as simple as this: I lay dying. My skin used to be darker. Now, I am sallow, wan, icteric. I am not quite bloodless, but that is coming. I can hear the whistle on the tracks. I can also hear screaming, but it is no one I know.
(216)

In the face of Baker's proposed solution to the problems of black fathers and sons in America, Everett offers his own startling response, one that moves beyond the abstractions of an educated and ideal literate class to instead focus on the transethnic, intimate, even visceral relationship between a son and his dying father.

After proving how the author has never left the text, Simion calls for a refinement of biographical readings of texts. Riffing on Serge Doubrovsky's *Pourquoi la Nouvelle*

Critique?, Simion observes that the failure of biographical reading as it is currently practiced is due to “the inexcusably narrow image of the creator’s life as seen in biographical criticism. The creator’s *life* is not a mere sum of details, it is a *significant conduct*, a collection of *discontinuous, partly obscure facts and gestures*, a line of *open, ambiguous meanings*... that, as we know from Sartre, tend to melt into a whole” (Simion 91). Simion maintains that biographical readings have failed precisely because critics have lost sight of the complicated nature of human beings. He argues that we as critics and readers have pared down the essence of our authors to simple containable categories whose borders never traverse each other, and that it is this oversight that has allowed biographical criticism to fail in the past. It is not surprising that the authors of this project make similar arguments against the containment of ethnic American literature and authorship by multicultural forces, presenting their content and form as if to better accommodate human nature. Responding to the difficulties of containing grief and complex human relations to the printed page, Everett deliberately blurs the boundaries between father and son, challenging theorists who critique literature and life as if our identities could be so easily compartmentalized.

Simion believes that biographical readings of this nature are inadequate, but that, nevertheless, the author is always in the work. Thus, proclaiming the author dead does not unlock the text’s meaning, either. He provides a possible solution to this critical conundrum when he writes, “*existence* must be brought back into criticism, not into the work (which the existence has never left)” (91). By existence, Simion refers to the projection of authorship that critics call into being through their criticism—the

“exemplary life that is able to cope with both consciousness and the unconscious” (92), but also the environment evoked by the text and its creator. Ultimately, in recounting this grappling with existence, I posit that Simion is describing the quality of intimacy—the unconscious connections one makes with oneself and with others through the act of reading. While Simion goes on to lament how criticism has taken over literary works and has influenced literature in such a way that authors anticipate the potential theories and criticisms that will be weighed against their works (92-3), Everett and Syjuco’s critique of literary critics seeking to limit ethnic American fiction allows us to see how such conversations and connections can be initiated on both sides of the divide.

In the end, the only barrier that the son as narrator in *Virgil Russell* seems unable to cross is that which would allow him to see his father for who he is and to let go of him. In the end, he imagines his father calling roll of the people haunting his imagination—Nat Turner writing the confessions of Styron, and “Murphy and Lang, we’re all in here, in all our various time zones and dress and dementias. And I am here, too, refusing to, as my father put it, cram for finals. No holy ghost for me, no accepting this one as my lord and savior, my guide and bookie, my plumber and electrician” (208). Following this confession, Everett’s novel ends with two scenes—one an imagined tragic scenario of the father dying while saving his son from the KKK, and the other a scene seemingly plucked from memory: The father performs the role of victim in order to gain the son’s sympathy, pretending he had no responsibility in the mother’s infidelity. The scenes are in fact, paired in terms of power: The klansman takes away their power and humanity under the guise of inferior race, just as his father “usurped her [that is, his mother’s] power” (225)

as a woman, a wife, and a mother. Describing his wife's infidelity to his son earlier in *Virgil Russell*, the father recalls being called a postmodernist, one whose "work was about itself and process and not about objective reality and life in the world" (79).

Solidifying the connection between his work and his wife's infidelity, the father insists that she has abandoned them, knowing that returning would mean "she would be doomed to recognize her memories as constructions of a left world, necessarily fictions, necessary fictions, because in looking back, she would see a reality to which her memories might be compared and contrasted and she would know that her memories were not that world" (79). The recollection—a memory of when his father learns of his mother's infidelity and then performs a simulacrum of grief in order to widen the divide between himself and his mother—underscores an event where humanity, "objective reality," and his father's postmodern storytelling collide. Like his mother, the son and narrator realizes that his father too creates necessary fictions, both in his writing life and in his "real" life. In fact, both lives are part of the same continuum. Not unlike *Ilustrado*'s Crispin, he and his father "transform memory into fiction. . . [and] fiction into memory" (Syjuco 296) in order to foster a sense of self more in line with the way they believe the world should be. Together, they set the terms by which they define themselves and their personal, ethnic, and cultural histories.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION: RELEASING DOUBLES INTO THE WORLD. . .

One heart is not connected to another through harmony alone. They are, instead, linked deeply through their wounds. Pain linked to pain, fragility to fragility. There is no silence without a cry of grief, no forgiveness without bloodshed, no acceptance without a passage through acute loss. That is what lies at the root of true harmony.

--Haruki Murakami, *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage*

I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh;—it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God’s feet, equal,—as we are!

--Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*

[A]ll writing of the narrative kind, and perhaps all writing, is motivated, deep down by a fear of and a fascination with mortality—by a desire to make the risky trip to the Underworld, and to bring something or someone back from the dead.

--Margaret Atwood, *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing*

In the opening of the novel *Pym*, professor Chris Jaynes is shocked to learn he has been denied tenure due to his refusal to serve on the university’s multicultural diversity committee and his obsession with the works of Edgar Allan Poe. Ostensibly taking on Toni Morrison’s challenge to unearth the ghostly “Africanist” presence in American literature, Jaynes seeks to discover within Poe’s prose “the intellectual source of racial Whiteness. Here, in these pages, was the very fossil record of how this odd and illogical sickness formed. Here was the twisted mythic underpinnings of modern racial thought

that could never before be dismantled because we were standing on them” (Johnson 8).¹⁴² Distraught not only at his sudden unemployment but also at having lost his job to self-proclaimed “Hip-Hop Theorist” Mosaic Johnson—very likely a nod to the novel’s author, Mat Johnson, Jaynes is comforted only by his discovery of a manuscript written by Dirk Peters, a supposedly fictional (and supposedly non-African American) character in Poe’s only novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*. Placing itself in the tradition of academic satires like Nabokov’s *Pnin* and Reed’s *Japanese by Spring* as well as seafaring novels like Charles Johnson’s *Middle Passage* (which was itself influenced by Equiano’s *Narrative*, Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, and Melville’s *Moby Dick* and *Benito Cereno*), Johnson’s *Pym* resembles and responds to Poe’s novel in both style and circumstance, with Chris Jaynes and his Dirk-like companion Garth calling to mind Poe’s characters, not to mention Poe himself, in their various nautical and authorial adventures.¹⁴³ *Pym* is presented as a written collaboration between the protagonist Chris Jaynes and a “Mr. Johnson” (whether this is Mosaic or Mat is not indicated) after the former has discovered and presumably returned from the very real Tsalal, the island of black natives fictionalized in Poe’s tale. Of the island, Jaynes reports, “Whether this was Tsalal or not, however, Garth and I could make no judgments. On the shore all I could discern was a

¹⁴² In Morrison’s essay, she discusses how she has always been curious about how other writers attempt to free themselves from the constraints that gender, race, and even class impose. What she finds in writings by black and white writers is that there is “no escape from racially inflected language, and the work writers do to unhobble the imagination from the demands of that language is complicated, interesting, and definitive” (13).

¹⁴³ For instance, the protagonist Chris Jaynes, just as does Poe’s titular character in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, introduces Johnson’s novel with an explanation about his return to the United States, even though the novel ends with an announcement of Jayne’s disappearance—a narrative inconsistency that is overlooked in both Johnson and Poe’s texts. As Jaynes himself explains, the concluding author’s note in Poe’s novel mentioning the protagonist’s sudden death adds “more confusion than solution” (33), an observation that holds true for the mirrored inconsistencies in Johnson’s novel.

collection of brown people, and this, of course, is a planet on which such are the majority” (322). In this way, Jaynes’s story ends with a conclusion that is as profound as it is mundane.

Jaynes’s argument that the problems of U.S. racism may find solutions in the works of early American white authors is confirmed in Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark*, which devotes part of its inquiry to Poe’s tropes of darkness and light in *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, proclaiming, “No early American writer is more important to the concept of American Africanism than Poe” (Morrison 32). My take on the trend towards transethnicity—whereby multiethnic American authors define ethnic identity via collaborative, self-conflicted, and even subversive forms of storytelling—does not diverge from Jayne and Morrison’s mission, but rather adds another layer to the pursuit of our perspective on American identity in the contemporary age. Morrison, in fact, refers to the “dark and abiding presence” of the African American other as a “haunting” (33), a fitting metaphor too for how the compulsion to reconfigure ethnicity within prescribed and unmoving lines has led to fictional attempts not only to trouble those lines, but in some cases to redraw them completely. The texts discussed in this dissertation are haunted by presences both within and beyond the books’ covers, and the driving need to historicize and contextualize Americanness has filled the literary world of the past few decades with authorial doubles, ghosts that materialize in and beyond the page in order to trouble existing narratives of ethnicity.

The spectrality in these works, in fact, represents a break from categories of multicultural certainty as well as postmodern cynicism by embracing transethnic fluidity,

ambiguity, and promise. In some texts, such as Everett or Syjuco's novels, the ghosts are literal: otherworldly characters defying death in order to influence or directly author their stories alongside, in place of, or even as doubles of other authorial characters. These literal ghosts may represent oppressed or forgotten beings or histories, and interact with their doubles and other characters in disobedience to the laws of "reality" or rationality. Additional presentations of ghostliness rely more on metaphor, on doubled representations of the literary and cultural histories and figures that haunt the narrative's form and content. With the latter metaphorical vision, it is important to note that ghostliness works in multiple directions; Morrison's spectral reading of Poe, for instance, haunts Poe's text and any future readings of that earlier text, just as much as the historical Africanist presence and other prevailing literal and cultural influences of the day haunted Poe's own work.¹⁴⁴

Pym's use of supposedly fictional and deceased characters brought to life combines these modes of haunting. In Johnson's novel, the ghosts become fleshly, ambulatory beings troubling the living, in the same way that Poe's own work occasions *Pym*'s structure and events. Tsalal's dark-skinned natives live on, as do Poe's mysterious monstrous white figures. Meanwhile, nearly 200 years after Poe pens his only novel, the title character himself appears at first "flopping like a stringless marionette" (134). When

¹⁴⁴ Poe's novel, for instance, was influenced by popular travel narratives of his time. For instance, he "borrowed" very heavily from, and spoke very highly of, Jeremiah N. Reynolds's *Address on the Subject of a Surveying and Exploring Expedition to the Pacific Ocean and the South Seas*, pointing out that Reynolds' character and "love of polite literature. . . point him out as the man of all men for the execution of the task" of recording his travels (70). Many critics also point out echoes of Melville's *Moby-Dick*, Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, folklore like the legend of the Flying Dutchman, and even Poe's own personal travels in the text. The novel would go on to inspire a sequel, entitled *An Antarctic Mystery* (1897), written by Poe admirer Jules Verne, as well as Charles Romeyn Dake's *A Strange Discovery* (1899). For more on the reading and writing of earlier texts through the lens of later postmodern works and vice versa, see Kiely and Moraru.

Pym finally awakens, he appraises Jaynes's darker-skinned companions and asks, "have you brought these slaves for trading?" (134). It is tempting to read this ghostly appearance of Pym in the traditional ways encouraged by classical multiculturalism: Johnson, as a black author, is using this setup as a way to speak back to dominant perceptions of African American males as uncivilized and uneducated, particularly in contrast to Pym, who is presented as well-regarded by his peers in both Poe and Johnson's texts. Reading the novel transethnically, however, shifts the focus away from presuming a dominant white audience while also challenging the thought that Jaynes is intended to be an exceptional representation of African Americanness (a notion that incidentally whitewashes Garth/Dirk and other characters in the novel and echoes criticism of Poe's text).

Rather, a transethnic interpretation of Jaynes' erudition would lead, for instance, to queries into the role that ethnic American literary scholars or even just ethnic intellectuals in general should play in the academy, particularly when, as in Jaynes' case, the academy as it stands is unwilling to let Jaynes "play" in the first place. In fact, his solution of eschewing the academy altogether in order to coordinate an Arctic expedition resonates with protagonists of other works such as Michael Thomas's *Man Gone Down* where, like *Pym*, the move away from the university job is as much an act of agency as it is desperation. Transethnicity moves beyond inquiries into the worthiness of *Pym* as a representation of African Americanness literature to instead question the obligations and responsibilities that intellectuals in general have in expanding the very boundaries of cultural experiences as well as the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of diversity-related

discourse. (As Jaynes himself points out, “The Diversity Committee has one primary purpose: so that the school can say it has a diversity committee. . . . It’s sort of like, if you had a fire, and instead of putting it out, you formed a fire committee.” [18]). To suggest that Johnson’s tale, then, is merely a remonstrative reversal of Poe’s text is to oversimplify both works. The former certainly plays on the structure and content of Poe’s novel, but whereas Poe’s novel is afflicted with plot holes and inconsistencies characteristic of the serialized nature of the original work as well as the storyteller’s discomfort with this relatively new genre of the novel, Johnson fills in the gaps and creates others by simply and consistently drawing attention to what Poe’s text seems to avoid: The ghostly others that disturb the white page and the white American psyche are here, and have always been here.

Ghostliness in transethnic novels draws attention to the cross-ethnic versions of the “Africanist” impulses that pervade much of American literature—that is, the “racially inflected language” from which Morrison argues there is “no escape” (13). While Morrison sought to unearth these specters in the form of literary criticism, the authors discussed in this project—both the imaginary and the empirical—take the transethnic tactic of fleshing out these restive spirits and demanding accountability via fiction, knowing that—even within this genre—no escape from issues of ethnicity and racism are possible. As comedian and writer Hari Kondabolu often proclaims in his stand-up work, “Telling me that I’m obsessed with talking about racism in America is like telling me I’m obsessed with swimming when I’m drowning.” The United States, Kondabolu implies, is defined as much by its racism as it is by its touted multicultural diversity. Or, to borrow

from Haruki Murakami, “One heart is not connected to another through harmony alone.” As Americans and as human beings, we are “linked deeply through [our] wounds” (Murakami 320). Transethnicity argues for a scalar expansion of Americanness to understand the wounds of racism not just, as Jaynes would have it, at its early literary source, but rather along a haunting historical continuum that views the present as speaking to the past and vice versa, and that further recognizes history itself as personal, individual, and inconsistent. Moving both forward and backward in time, transethnicity thus provokes Nat Turner to write William Styron in *Percival Everett by Virgil Russell*. It incites Jane and Akiko’s rewriting of Sei Shōnagon’s 11th-century lifewriting, *The Pillow Book*, in Ozeki’s *My Year of Meats*,¹⁴⁵ as well as Nao’s overwriting of Proust in *A Tale for the Time Being*. It is what inspires Riel to access pastiche, amalgamation, and integration in order to write her family’s story in Erdrich’s *Shadow Tag*. And finally, the transethnic process is what, in Amy Tan’s *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, allows Precious Auntie, the protagonist Ruth’s deceased grandmother, to literally write through her American granddaughter’s hand, Ruth’s mother believing that the ghost of Precious Auntie guides her young daughter while writing on a sand tray. In fact, even as the young Ruth expresses skepticism about the spectral appropriation of her hand, her current job as a ghostwriter—as an author and, in many ways, a translator— memorializes her grandmother’s legacy, as Ruth freely offers up her hand to help others find the most fitting voices in which to express themselves.

¹⁴⁵ For more on *The Pillow Book* (枕草子, *Makura no Sōshi*) and its connection to *My Year of Meats*, see my July 2015 article in *College Literature* entitled, “Hybrid Vigor” *The Pillow Book* and Collaborative Authorship in Ruth Ozeki’s *My Year of Meats*.

The literary time travel that transethnicity incites sometimes manifests itself as actual time travel in metafictional form in novels such as Charles Yu's *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe*¹⁴⁶ and Kiese Laymon's *Long Division*. Notably, Laymon's text has two protagonists named Citoyen "City" Coldson—one City exists in 2013, while the second doubly fictional and ghostly City exists in 1985 and time travels to 1964 in the book-within-the-book, (also titled *Long Division*). Visiting his grandmother in the small rural town of Melahatchie, Mississippi, the City of the present is struck by how little in the local library resembles his life or experiences. Thinking about the mystical book-within-a-book containing the other City, he admits, "Even though the book was set in 1985, I didn't know what to do with the fact that the narrator was black like me, stout like me, in the ninth grade like me, and had the same first name as me" (29). Faced with a similar—albeit historically removed—version of himself on the page, City is more perplexed than relieved, unable at first to comprehend what this disturbing doubled resemblance could mean. He quickly adapts, however, admitting, "I just loved and feared so much about the first chapter of that book. For example, I loved that someone with the last name 'Crump' was in a book. Sounds dumb, but I knew so many Crumps in Mississippi in my real life, but I had never seen one Crump in anything I'd read" (29). Such an understanding defies the very presumptions of ethnic groups as distinct and well-defined categories that are represented and celebrated by multicultural diversity. Instead, City derives some hope from finding a mirror of himself, friends, and

¹⁴⁶ In Yu's novel, metafictional language actually gets encoded into time travel, with time travel devices like the Tense Operator indicating both a piece of machinery as well as a literal change in grammatical tenses.

family in *Long Division* while knowing that the authors represented in the local library wrote “sentences in those books [and] never imagined they’d be read by Grandma, Uncle Relle, LaVander Peeler, my cousins, or anyone I’d ever met” (103). The revelation of finally finding oneself in print—of recognizing your double on the printed page despite multiculturalism’s erasure of lower class, lesser educated members of ethnic groups—is its own kind of magical realism, one that in Laymon’s tale is as otherworldly as time travel. Jacqueline Woodson, author of *Brown Girl Dreaming*, sees this need for unearthing one’s double as an authorial calling, stating, “This mission is what’s been passed down to me: to write stories that have been historically absent in this country’s body of literature, to create mirrors for the people who so rarely see themselves inside contemporary fiction, and windows for those who think we are no more than the stereotypes they’re so afraid of.”¹⁴⁷ In many ways, Woodson describes writing back to history’s restrictive approaches to ethnicity, returning to fill in the missing gaps in order to allow readers to move forward. Woodson’s mission is echoed by Laymon: Like many novels discussed in this project, Laymon’s text begins as the story of a reader and ends with the birth of a writer, both the 2013 and 1985 versions of *City* realizing that it is their privilege and responsibility to fill the blank pages at the novel’s end in order to write to all of that which haunts him.

Actually, it is no coincidence that the hole into which the 1985 *City* descends in order to travel through time resembles a grave or, at the least, a subterranean space not

¹⁴⁷ This sentiment echoes that of Adrienne Rich when she famously addressed the male-dominated Modern Language Association in 1971, stating that the woman writer “goes to poetry or fiction looking for *her* way of being in the world [and instead] comes up against something that negates everything she is about: she meets the image of Woman in books written by men. . . . what she does not find is that absorbed, drudging, puzzled, sometimes inspired creature, herself, who sits at a desk trying to put words together” (39).

unlike the underground tunnels through which *Pym*'s Jaynes and Garth escape in order to reach Tsalal, or the cave-like spaces initially favored by the writers in Krauss's *Great House*. Realizing that "'tomorrow' was a word now like the thousands of other words in that hole" (262), City fumbles down into the dark space that smells of ink, sweat, and pine trees only to discover what feels like bodies: "I found their thighs, their flimsy T-shirts, and finally all of their crusty hands. . . . Hand in hand, deep in the underground of Mississippi, we all ran away to tomorrow because we finally could..." (263). Through City's submerged encounter with ethereal others, his transethnic realization that he must write himself into existence, and the characters' foreseen spectral reemergence into tomorrow, City begins to rectify himself to his past, present, and future. Thus his writing enables him to connect with his grandfather who died at the hands of a forlorn KKK member on the eve of an event that became known as Mississippi Burning, with his future daughter Baize who ceases to exist after characters' actions alter her past, and with the other ghosts who have troubled him in multiple timelines. Both Laymon's text and the novel-within-a-novel end in ellipses, appropriately the favorite punctuation mark of the metaleptic Baize, who explains, "The ellipsis always knows something more came before it and something more is coming after it" (245). The ellipsis, then, becomes the ephemeral marker of transethnic metafiction, the sign—as Avery Gordon explains in describing ghosts—of "a loss, sometimes of life, sometimes of a path not taken" while also representing "a future possibility, a hope" (63-4). This momentous mark, three dots temporarily suspending both space and time, further recalls the *páginas en blanco* that

disturb and compel so many characters as they join forces with the phantoms who haunt them in order to make their transethnic attempts to author themselves.

Not unlike Jane's "living ghosts" in *My Year of Meats*—that is, the mistreated women who willfully remain in an in-between state in order to persecute their previous oppressors (Ozeki 176), ghosts of the past choose to linger among the living in order to compel these author-protagonists to fulfill the wills of their often marginalized phantom visitors. As Gordon explains, "the ghost is alive, so to speak. We are in relation to it and it has designs on us such that we must reckon with it graciously, attempting to offer it a hospitable memory *out of a concern for justice*. Out of a concern for justice would be the only reason one would bother" (64). The attempt to offer an honorable and hospitable memory—what certainly translates in our texts in question to the act of writing—also has the added benefit of forcing the characters to reckon with themselves. In fact, the primary mission that unites many of these ghosts is their belief that the characters must face themselves and do as Maalouf does when he proclaims, "I scour my memory to find as many ingredients of my identity as I can. I then assemble and arrange them. I don't deny any of them" (16). By releasing their ghostly doubles into the world, the authors thus argue for the need for reimagine selfhood as fluid, nuanced, and duly informed by all that came before it.

As suggested by Gordon's notion of a call for justice, the ghostliness that pervades these texts also draws attention to the urgent material consequences provoked by the entrenched ethnic divisions demarcating ethnic, class, and gender lines. The teenaged Michael Brown in Ferguson, MO, described by his killer as both a violent

criminal and a kind of superhuman “demon” capable of running through bullets, joins Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Yvette Smith, and others¹⁴⁸ in a recent list of deaths that have sparked worldwide protests as well as discussion in legal and social circles on how to better understand and account for the racial stigmas that persons of color must face. Seen as a “what” rather than a “who,” the 18-year old Brown was labeled by both his killer and certain media sources in uncomplicated terms that erased his history and the many other experiences and influences that defined him. The rallying call of the protests that followed—that “black lives matter”—draws attention to the humanity of African Americans, a seemingly innocuous claim that in the weeks since the onset of the demonstrations have expanded to include a consideration of who truly receives the benefits of American citizenship. Contemplating the difficulties of being counted as a Latino American, for instance, Lázaro Lima connects “the juridical notion of *corpus delicti* (literally, body of crime). . . to the national body politic,” noting that “categories of citizenship and the discourses of national belonging are plagued with metaphors with juridical meaning and historical weight (alien, citizen, legal, illegal, foreigner, national,

¹⁴⁸ Black teenager Michael Brown was shot by white police officer Darren Wilson on August 9, 2014, in Ferguson, MO. International unrest followed the wake of a late November 2014 grand jury decision against seeking criminal charges for Wilson. A little over a week later, protests around the world were further fueled by a similar grand jury decision to not indict Officer Daniel Pantaleo, who was videotaped as putting African American horticulturalist Eric Garner in a fatal chokehold in July 2014. Garner’s dying words of “I can’t breathe” became the rallying cry for these protests, particularly for the form of protests called die-ins, where participants lie on the ground to simulate death. While the grand jury was still deliberating on the Michael Brown decision, 12-year old African American boy Tamir Rice was shot by police officers in Cleveland, Ohio, after the officers (one of whom was previously deemed unfit for duty) mistook a toy gun as real. When his 14-year old sister rushed to her brother’s side after the shooting, the officers reportedly tackled and handcuffed her before detaining her in a police car. Meanwhile, near the beginning of 2014, Yvette Smith was shot by Texas cops, who initially claimed she was armed, and then later had to retract that allegation. Wilson’s description of Brown as both superhuman and subhuman echoes City’s delicate explanation of the nuances of language to his friend MyMy—mentioned in the introductory chapter of this dissertation.

immigrant, migrant)” (15). These metaphors, Lima points out, designate its subjects as deviant, forever existing outside of the concept of Americanness. As if calling to mind these legally and historically fraught titles, Carlos Bulosan wrote, “I feel like a criminal running away from a crime I did not commit. And the crime is that I am a Filipino in America” (173). The crime of being a minority person in America—or what Laymon, in an essay on blackness, describes as being “born on parole” (43)—continues to be strongly felt long after Bulosan wrote that letter in 1941; Lisa Marie Cacho notes that lower classes and people of color “are not merely excluded from legal protection but criminalized as always already the object and target of law, *never its authors or addressees*” (5, emphasis mine). Failing to perceive the fluidity of ethnic identity—as happened both with Brown and Garner and in literary instances like that in Wideman’s *Fanon*—leads not only to disenfranchisement, but in many cases to death. Ghostliness becomes a metaphor for this disempowerment, one that transethnically reframes the marginal status of ethnic Americans as a potential position of authorship and agency. After all, ghosts are neither confined to death nor to the margins or borders of life, but move through them and beyond them.



Figure 10. I, Too, Am Harvard. Untitled. itooamharvard.tumblr.com. Tumblr, Mar 1, 2014.

At the same time that these conversations are taking place, however, they are being countered by dismissals in the media and government about whether ethnic background and skin color factored into Brown, Garner, or any of these other cases at all. The sheer disparity between these two sets of discussions—between the attempt to expand Americanness by giving nuance to its definition and the attempt to whitewash the cases as having nothing to do with race—highlights the wide partition still dividing considerations of ethnicity in the United States. The variety of responses to recent racial tension in the United States has led not only to the nationwide calls for change in judicial practices of the state, but also to smaller scale protests that highlight the importance of paying attention to language and behavior in even our most intimate and commonplace interactions. For instance, at Harvard, Oxford, Cambridge, and dozens of other campuses around the world, students have launched photo campaigns (see figure 10) confronting deep-rooted assumptions of “authenticity” related to race, class, nationality, and gender,

resulting in the increased proliferation of the term “microaggressions” to describe the affronts and often subtle insults experienced by marginalized groups on a regular basis.¹⁴⁹ The term, in fact, echoes Jaynes’s own impetus behind his obsession with Poe when he asserts, “Curing America’s racial pathology couldn’t be done with good intentions or presidential elections. Like all diseases, it had to be analyzed at a *microscopic level*” (Johnson 8, emphasis mine).

Jaynes’s prescribed plan of action, however, is incomplete: The perceived chasm between the smaller microaggression projects versus the international indignation in the wake of Brown and Garner’s grand jury decisions and the criminalization of supposed American citizens—that is, the belief that one scale of protest has no connection to the other—leads to a failure to address the very terms under which ethnic self-expression can truly happen. It is notable, for instance, that both *Pym* and *Long Division* discuss the circumstances of their writing in ways that suggest none of the conventional methods one might undertake to make one’s work known and published. For example, while Jaynes devotes his lifework to the significance of fiction, he also recognizes that his own “true life” experiences must be reframed “in nonthreatening story form” and “under the guise of fiction” (Johnson 4), since doing so not only prevents him from being sued by various corporations lambasted in the text, but also allows his story to be more palatable and believable to potential readers.¹⁵⁰ While furthering Díaz and Foer’s discussion of the sinuous nature of truth when it comes to self-defining experiences, Jaynes’s choice of

¹⁴⁹ While the term “microaggressions” was coined in 1970 by Chester M. Pierce, it has a wide digital presence thanks to recent undertakings like The Microaggression Project, started in 2011.

¹⁵⁰ Jaynes’s act of “hiding” his real-life experiences behind fiction is an ironic reversal of earlier beliefs that “authentic” ethnic American literature should primarily take the form of the ethnic autobiography or *bildungsroman*.

genre also contemplates the limits of being taken seriously when relaying experiences that are unfamiliar to a privileged populace, a worthwhile consideration in the face of all that Pym's maligned companion Dirk Peters endured in failing to get his own story published in Poe's time (Johnson 61-62, 311-312).

The imperfect conditions under which such self-expression can now take place affirm the need for transethnic approaches to identity and for emphasizing the importance of form as it relates to content in interpreting texts. Thus, unlike previous multicultural approaches to ethnic American literature, a transethnic reading would not ignore form or genre, or consider them as secondary to the work, but would instead explore form as a political and rhetorical choice that directly influences content. For instance, while Jaynes describes his experiences as "challeng[ing] the imaginations even of those of us who experienced them firsthand" (129), he recognizes that fiction will not be received in the same way as, for instance, the facts of the Eric Garner case, which were immortalized on film and yet still ineffectual in sparking an indictment of his killer from a grand jury. Similarly, though there is no question that Laymon's City will do his best to write Baize back into existence, he recognizes that "making Baize really reappear was going to be harder than making her disappear, harder than anything I'd ever imagined in my life" (262). For City then, the act of going underground and the act of asserting his selfhood through writing are not incongruous exploits. As suggested by City and his fellow underground bodies running "away to tomorrow" (263), these acts are not even permanent but are themselves ephemeral and subject to change when the circumstances finally allow for—as they do at the end of Ellison's *Invisible Man*—a "socially

responsible” reemergence from the hole (Ellison 581). When the traditional methods of writing and publishing are not immediately accessible—as seen in the case of Jaynes, City, Erdrich’s Irene, Apostol’s Sol, Díaz’s Oscar, and so many others—what alternatives exist? The words that trouble the creators of these metafiction are the same ones that haunt the implied author in Morrison’s *Home*, who is instructed by the protagonist Frank Money, “Don’t paint me as some enthusiastic hero” (84). Frank’s command reminds us that there exists those without the privilege of controlling their image in print, that some are cut off from the realm of mainstream publishing as well as from the ability to be seen not as subhuman or superhuman, but simply as human.

The question of form, reception, and of where and how transethnic modes of expression can take place prompts us to reconsider the very future of American literature. Will the end of multiculturalism as we currently know it lead to a rearrangement of American books in bookstores and publishing catalogs away from ethnic group affiliations like “African American literature”? Will it spark Ishmael Reed’s fantasy of a university where “ethnic studies” does not privilege any one ethnicity or nationality over another in focus or funding, or even instigate a radical disciplinary overhaul where scholars of ethnic American studies are known, simply, as Americanists or by some other, more tangible category? And, finally, will transethnic flexibilities in relation to self-expression and self-construal erupt into the “large canvas” that Dimock expects will make cultural and generic distinctions “unrobust. . . los[ing] their claim to visibility altogether” (55)? While it is difficult to foretell what a transethnic approach to identity could mean to American literature in the long term, the process in the short term could

well incite something akin to what bell hooks calls “a postmodernism of resistance. . . directed towards the enhancement of black critical consciousness and the strengthening of our collective capacity to engage in meaningful resistance struggle” (517-8). While hooks’ postmodernism of resistance certainly bears marks of the activist impulses of transethnic writing, nevertheless, the terms under which hooks argues for her activism—that is, in part by demanding more inclusion and visibility of black writers in experimental fiction—still perpetuates classical models of multicultural celebration. As I argue in previous chapters, increased visibility and inclusion have not completely brought about the transformations sought by multiculturalism as we currently know it. Instead of framing the trend towards transethnicity in terms of resistance, then, I argue that the transethnic process should give way to a postmodernism of transauthorship, that is, a means of making postmodern elements more self-evident and comprehensible in order to empower readers into authoring themselves. As I mentioned in the introduction, the critics and transethnic authors described here have moved beyond the postmodern question of whether the metaphorical or empirical author has died or have returned; the transethnic emphasis on the ghostliness of the author actually makes the question immaterial. Postmodernism in the transethnic age thus will contend directly with that ghostly presence by explicitly sharing the role and powers of authorship with the readers themselves.

Actually, though many scholars and writers, including quite a few discussed in this dissertation, are uneasy about postmodernism as an umbrella term for their art, their apprehensiveness reveals a way to better access postmodern transauthorship. For

example, Syjuco's *Ilustrado* certainly has the hallmarks of many postmodern texts—the fragmentary narrative complete with footnotes, a conglomeration of styles and texts, and a maximalist level of often self-referential detail—but the author insists in multiple interviews that *Ilustrado* is merely “contemporary,” telling Joyce Hor-Chung Lau, “I don’t particularly like the postmodern tag. . . It’s a novel of today, a contemporary novel. The way we consume information is fragmented” (A12). His distinction between the contemporary and the postmodern, in fact, confirms the possibility that postmodern transauthorship is related directly to accessible forms. The “contemporary,” then, suggests an omnipresence of certain postmodern tropes in popular culture. Significantly, Jablon points out that more recent proclamations of the death of postmodernism may be due to the fact that postmodernism itself has become too pervasive and, in a sense, almost too accessible in certain modes—that postmodern traits have become too easy to spot or too pedestrian to mention. While that is possibly true, what is often not broadly accessible or transparent are the effects that these widespread postmodern elements can have on the way we view ourselves and interact with others. Taking Syjuco’s disdain for postmodernism in a more condemnatory direction, for instance, E. San Juan Jr. censures assumptions of postmodernism as a universal, global phenomenon throughout his critical work, insisting that many non-Western countries today are left out of postmodern ideologies. Of the Philippines, he goes so far as to say that “postmodern cultural studies. . . is now replicating McKinley’s gunboat policy of ‘Benevolent Assimilation’” (118), arguing that prevalent postmodern views on globalization and cosmopolitan, for instance, whitewash the oppression of female overseas workers. Jablon argues that, even

if we can overcome the burdens that those like San Juan Jr. attribute to postmodernism, dismissive assertions about the death of postmodernism preclude any resistance to its effects. She writes that, despite its contemporary pervasiveness, postmodernism has been historically deemed as accessible only to “a select few. Theorists,” she acerbically observes, “would rather murder postmodernism than watch helplessly as it is fondled by the hands of strangers. The idea that its tropes are familiar to anyone watching prime-time television is an insult to their intelligence” (176).

Extending the accessible elements of postmodern metafiction to the notion of self-authorship fosters transethnicity in a way that may be more accessible than obscure critical theories whose audiences are meant to be more academic, elite, or otherwise exclusive. For example, drawing attention to the wink to readers and audience in the form of self-referential jokes lets readers in on the joke as well (or at the least helps them understand it), empowering them to collaborate and respond in turn. By actively pursuing accessibility and by embracing postmodern elements that promote open self-expression and challenge multiculturalism’s negative aspects, postmodern transauthorship can foster transethnic aspects of contestation and conversation in fiction and other forms that may prove to be productive for extensive audiences. The limitation of form thus lamented by Chris Jaynes in *Pym* is converted into a strength, a way to present and name unfamiliar transethnic ideas through recognizable vehicles and to produce mirrors that reflect wider segments of humanity.

The transethnic authors in this project further signal a paradigm shift from ethnic American literature to simply American literature not through an assimilative erasure of

difference or a multicultural celebration of difference, but rather through a careful focus on the negotiations that authors and their protagonists are making in terms of self-definition. Rather than centering critical analysis on specific and distinct ethnic groups, transethnic theorists can focus on relational moments between and among cultures and their various intersections within and across texts. What results from such an approach—what I contend the ghosts of literary tradition are compelling us to do—is akin to an oppositional or transgressive multiculturalism. This multiculturalism after multiculturalism is giving rise to a transethnic body of works that renounce the idea that ethnic groups are inherently reducible, instead recognizing such groups as having entangled backgrounds and shared experiences that influence self-construal in multiple arenas.

In creating these authorial and literary doubles, the authors discussed in this project exhibit an understanding of the multiplicity inherent in having to constantly adapt their interactions to ever-changing social contexts and to the historical and literary connections that often influence those contexts. In their transethnic approaches, then, these spectral doubles also ask us as educators, policymakers, consumers, and readers to consider what role language and curriculum will play in actively shaping the shifting circumstances under which selfhood is defined, and how we may be instrumental and useful in contributing to the ongoing formation of selfhood in all its varied forms. For instance, Jaynes's refusal in *Pym* to serve on his university's diversity committee—one of the main causes for his unexpected unemployment—echoes the conflict at the heart of Reed's *Japanese by Spring*, a novel whose fantastical elements include, as

aforementioned, a reconfiguration of the protagonist Benjamin Puttbutt's English department, with authors like Chaucer and Milton now falling under the department of Ethnic Studies in the sub-field of European Studies, "with the same budget and faculty as the rest" (Reed 90).¹⁵¹ The fantasy of decentralizing Eurocentric studies in Puttbutt's department and, as Jaynes describes it, the ineffectual, token membership of the non-white faculty member in a university diversity committee, symbolize the main problems with current institutions that tout multiculturalism as their foundation: *By reifying and limiting what ethnicity means, such institutions further limit what multiculturalism can actually do*. Though Jaynes and Puttbutt's methods of protesting the restrictions of multiculturalism are dissimilar, they both contend with the question of ghosts. Neither questions the existence of these apparitions of the past, but their refusal to play along with existing multicultural policies suggest that there is much difference of opinion in how we should interpret what the ghosts are asking of us.

Most significantly, incorporating a ghostly instability and unknowability into the foundation of multicultural policies—whether those policies exist in government, in the workplace, or in school or university curricula—would better accommodate those who are normally in the most vulnerable positions of being forgotten, ignored, or eliminated. In this way, transethnicity forces us to rethink the nation and who we understand to be its citizens, to include and consider the ghosts and the seemingly unnatural—those who Mae

¹⁵¹ The controversial upending of the educational system at *Japanese by Spring*'s Jack London College may have been inspired by the debates surrounding Stanford's Western Culture courses in the late 1980s, mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation. As suggested earlier, Johnson, Reed, and Nabokov's novels form an odd subgenre of metafictional works featuring ethnic American author-protagonists who are barred from or otherwise unable to survive in academia, to which we may add works like Michael Thomas's *Man Gone Down* and Percival Everett's *Erasure*.

Ngai calls, in describing illegal aliens, the “impossible subjects” (5) and those who Dean Spade calls, in describing transgender individuals, “impossible people.”¹⁵² Relating supposedly unviable existences to spectrality, death, and our roles as writers, interpreters, and witnesses, Derrida points out,

If he loves justice at least, the ‘scholar’ of the future, the ‘Intellectual’ of tomorrow should learn it and from the ghost. He should learn to live by learning not how to make conversation with the ghost but how to talk with him, with her, how to let thus speak or how to give them back speech, even if it is in oneself, in the other, in the other in oneself: they are always there, spectres, even if they do not exist, even if they are no longer, even if they are not yet. (221)

Occupying spaces of physical and temporal impossibility, the subjects lost to multiculturalism’s emphasis on easy categorization are demanding to be heard in their own ways and on their own terms. Jodey Castricano emphasizes the use of “with” in Derrida’s formation, stating that his admonition that we learn to talk *with* ghosts “produces a sense of simultaneity and doubleness” which leads to knowledge of how to “use [ghosts] instrumentally and, in turn, whether one knows it or *not*, to be used by them” (134). Working towards productive and useful conversations with these apparitions not only places us in the framework of time-traveling and border-crossing collaborations, but also initiates new approaches to learning—as Derrida suggests—how to live our lives.

¹⁵² The idea of the unnatural or impossible extends into fiction. Recently, narratologists have drawn attention to a trend of texts that violate traditional conventions by portraying unrealistic (or even antirealistic) events or methods of storytelling. Much of the time travel presented in many of the transethnic texts discussed in this project is an example of such unnatural narratives, as are the unusual turn of events that occur in both Laymon and Johnson’s novels. For more on this topic, see Jan Alber and Monika Fludernik.

In her poem, "Good Mirrors Are Not Cheap," Audre Lorde encourages readers to move away from self-loathing and negatively judging our ghostly doubles. Instead, the speaker asks us to look behind the glass, to see the glass makers who are perpetuating the harmful messages that seem to distort our images in the first place. "It is a waste of time," she writes, "hating a mirror / or its reflection / instead of stopping the hand that makes glass with distortions [...] Because at the same time / down the street / a glassmaker is grinning / turning out new mirrors that lie" (15). While institutions ossify ethnic identity and perpetuate a false notion of authenticity, ethnic American authors posit that one can write in defiance of these sneering glassmakers. Invoking ghosts of the past while also creating ghostly doubles and haunting echoes of themselves, transethnic authors underscore the power that transethnic glassmakers have to influence self-image and self-expression in productive ways.

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